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## Olivier Messiaen and the culture of modernity

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# **Olivier Messiaen and the Culture of Modernity**

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## Olivier Messiaen and the Culture of Modernity

This study interprets the French composer Olivier Messiaen as a religious modernist with a view to revealing a new critical perspective on the origin, style and poetics of his music and its importance in the twentieth century.

Chapter 1 reveals how certain socio-political ideals and symbolist notions of catharsis and redemption (in the writings of Joséphin Péladan and Joris-Karl Huysmans) are refracted through Charles Tournemire's music and aesthetics, and incorporated by Messiaen into his earliest compositions to support his self-proclaimed role of the 'liberator' of humanity in his *Technique de mon langage musical (TMLM)*. Plainchant and the 'acciaccatura principle' are shown in Chapter 2 to be at the basis of Messiaen's modes of limited transposition and his harmonic thinking. Mode is used as an umbrella term relating pitch, rhythm and colour to unveil interpretative possibilities not envisaged in *TMLM*.

Time and eternity (in the writings of St Thomas Aquinas and Henri Bergson), and the Catholic ideals of predestination and filiation (in the thought of Dom Columba Marmion), are investigated in Chapter 3 in relation to two major works of the 1930s. Chapter 4 elucidates Messiaen's subsumption of surrealist ideals of art and love in his music and aesthetics. In doing so the religious-modernist poetics in his songs of the 1930s and the complex music of the 1940s is explored.

Messiaen's synthesis of colour and improvisation in his treatment of birdsong, one of the most strikingly original, religious and modern aspects of his music, is examined in Chapter 5. The final chapter exposes the ways in which Messiaen's music attempts to transfigure the negative aesthetics of modernity through a discussion of the concept of the 'Abyss', and his autobiographical opera *St François d'Assise* (1975-83).

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There are many others who have aided me in this endeavour. When I was still at school I arrived home one day to find an envelope that had been sent from England marked 'Fragile: Do not bend'. Knowing that I was interested in Messiaen, Dennis Hunt had sent me a copy of Messiaen's *Apparition de l'Église éternelle* that had come via several other hands from Messiaen himself. This set me on a road of inquiry. Thanks also go to Jane O'Brien who first inspired me to enjoy and value musical research. In addition, many avid musical conversations with Felix Aprahamian and David Trendell have been an invaluable source of motivation throughout. Anna McCready has read various drafts of this study which has profited both from her critical wisdom and support.

I would like to thank my parents, Peter and Ann, and my two sisters, Edwina and Diana, for their continual love and support. Finally, the year 2002 has seen the death of my oldest and dearest friend, Lindsay O'Neill, without whom nothing would have been begun. This work is dedicated to his memory.

‘There are people in the world who can easily bear the wailing of factory sirens, the blaring of car horns, the stupid barking of dogs, but who are unable to hear birdsong without disquiet.

Birds sing for themselves alone. But it happens that, in order to sing the loudest, certain birds search out the brotherhood of mankind.’ (Pierre Reverdy)

‘Where is the sculptor who could retrieve with the point of his chisel the naiveté of past centuries?’ (Viollet-le-Duc)

## Introduction

In a programme note for a concert given on 10 May 1943, Olivier Messiaen summed up his life thus far:

Son of the poetess Cécile Sauvage (who wrote for his birth *L'âme en bourgeon*) Olivier Messiaen was born on 10 December 1908 at Avignon (Vaucluse). He began to compose following his own instinct, from the age of seven. Then he entered the Paris Conservatoire, where he obtained the first prizes for piano accompaniment, counterpoint and fugue, history of music, organ and improvisation, and finally the first prize for composition. For 10 years he taught at the Ecole Normale de Musique, and at the Schola [Cantorum]. In October 1931, he was appointed organist of La Trinité; he founded, in 1936 - with André Jolivet, [Jean Yves] Daniel-Lesur and Yves Baudrier - the group 'Jeune France'. Since April 1941, he has been professor of harmony at the Paris Conservatoire.

Beyond his traditional studies, Olivier Messiaen has worked on plainchant and Hindu rhythms; he is passionate about quarter tones and birdsong. Above all, since he began composing, he has utilised a particular language without any attachment to a school. He has sought to determine [fixer] these principal traits in his recent work: *Technique de mon langage musical* (currently in press). The procedures of this language - melodic procedures (binary and ternary phrases, upbeat [anacrouses] and terminations [désinances]), harmonic procedures (modes of limited transposition), rhythmic procedures (added values, augmented rhythms and non-retrogradable rhythms)

- and the bizarre terminology used to describe them, have often been criticised - perhaps wrongly! Because the author did not know the workings of this language until recently, he exploited them *unwittingly* [*sans le faire exprès*] throughout these years.

Olivier Messiaen is above all a Catholic musician. Religious or not, his works carry the mark of the Christian faith, and implicitly sing of the mystery of Christ. Nearly all are published [*chez Durand, Leduc, and Lemoine* (crossed out)]. They already form quite a large catalogue. We cite: *Préludes* for piano (1929) - *les Offrandes oubliées* for orchestra (1930) - *Hymne au Saint Sacrement* for orchestra (1932) - *la Nativité du Seigneur* for organ (1935) - *Poèmes pour Mi* for voice and piano (1936) - *Fête des belles eaux* for six Ondes Martenot (written for the Water and Light Festival at the 1937 Exposition) - *Chants de Terre et de Ciel* for voice and piano (1938) - *Les corps glorieux* for organ (1939) - *Quatuor pour le fin du Temps* for violin, clarinet, violincello and piano (written in captivity in 1940-41) and, finally, *Visions de l'Amen* for two pianos (written in 1943 especially for the *Concerts de la Pléiade*).<sup>1</sup>

As a summary of Messiaen's belief in his own achievements - his pedagogical history, his affiliations, aspirations, technical armoury and his selected list of works - this manifesto is impressive for a 35-year-old composer. Yet this epistle highlights the

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<sup>1</sup> Messiaen, Olivier, Undated ms. draft for the programme book for the première of *Visions de l'Amen* at the *Concert de la Pléiade* on 10 May 1943, in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, BN Res. Vm. dos. 70 (11), 5-6. Capitalisation in the titles of works is as in Messiaen's letter. All translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

vast lacunae in our knowledge of his early life that is only now beginning to be filled.<sup>2</sup> We are left wondering about Messiaen's intellectual and artistic development from childhood, his early conservatoire years, and his teaching at the Schola Cantorum. While some nuggets of this are recoverable from the vast alluvial goldfield of Messiaen's writings, and from interviews with the composer, much remains out of reach.<sup>3</sup> Messiaen's programme note is revealing not only in what he says, and the way he says it, but also in what remains unsaid. A closer examination of his text reveals more about why Messiaen does not discuss some aspects of his life and music.

Messiaen's literary style is very much that of an *explication du texte*. As with much of his writing, its prosaic and proselytising quality is designed to stage-manage the reception and meaning of his music.<sup>4</sup> He tells us that he regards his music to be

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<sup>2</sup> See Nigel Simeone and Peter Hill's forthcoming *Messiaen in Words and Pictures* [provisional title], (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> Lyon, Raymond, 'Entretien avec Olivier Messiaen', *Le Courier Musicale de France*, no. 64 (1978), 127. Messiaen states that he was born in Avignon by accident, and that he is not a man of the Midi but carries a Flemish name [*nom Flammand*]. He also states that his childhood in Grenoble, le Dauphiné, l'Oisans and la Meije all influenced him. He went to school like all the others, but on Thursdays and Sundays he got to play a piano that was very old and out of tune, 'but it didn't matter, it delighted me [*il me ravissait*] and I learnt to play the piano practically all by myself. I also learnt to compose practically all alone. I did harmony essays and even, it is somewhat amusing, I wrote canons, as one does in the strettos of fugues'.

<sup>4</sup> In this light see the two pages of the proofs for Claude Samuel's 1986 revision of his book *Entretiens avec Olivier Messiaen* [(Paris: Pierre Belfond, 1967), trans. Felix Aprahamian (London: Stainer and Bell, 1976) as *Musique et Couleur: Nouveaux Entretiens avec Olivier Messiaen* (Paris: Pierre Belfond, 1986) trans. E. Thomas Glasow (Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press, 1994)], published in Thomas Daniel Schlee and Dietrich Kämper eds., *Olivier Messiaen: La Cité Céleste - Das himmlische Jerusalem* (Cologne: Wienand, 1998), 146. The extraordinary amount of Messiaen's handwriting on these pages reveals how careful Messiaen was in presenting his image to the public. All quotations from Samuel's conversations with Messiaen in this study are taken from the *Nouveaux Entretiens* unless otherwise marked.

iconoclastic ‘without any attachment to a school’, and that his works ‘carry the mark of the Christian faith, and implicitly sing of the mystery of Christ’. So he connects his creativity to his faith, and it is this aspect of Messiaen’s aesthetics that most commentators have avoided exploring.

Throughout Messiaen’s life his music changed, his use of icons changed and his taste for the starched collars of the 1930s evolved into the brightly coloured shirts of his later decades.<sup>5</sup> Why, then, has our understanding of this composer changed so little?

In fact, despite peripheral changes of style, Messiaen’s spiritual message remained consistent. Throughout his life and work he sought to sing of the glory and resurrection of Christ and of the transfiguring of humanity in the Christian image. He sought to achieve this by using a modernist musical idiom, an aesthetic that was seemingly at odds with his musical mission, which he stated was ‘to revive the faith in the luminous and positive elements of the Christian religion’.<sup>6</sup> Messiaen’s relation to modernism, and the spiritual intention behind his extremist stance are at the heart of this study.

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<sup>5</sup> Compare the photograph of Messiaen at the organ of La Trinité in 1931 (in Schlee and Kämper Op. Cit., 139) with later photographs from the 1970s and onward. In a conversation with Irina Nikolska, Witold Lutoslawski stated that Nadia Boulanger had said of Messiaen: ‘ “Messiaen is a poor composer, for he wears collars which are far from being fresh (.)” ... For Nadia and those who shared her opinion, there was only one composer: Igor Stravinsky.’ Her comment about Messiaen perhaps refers to Messiaen’s seemingly anti-modernist stance in his music and discourse, an issue that is at the heart of my study. Irina Nikolska, *Conversations with Witold Lutoslawski* (1987-92), trans. Valeri Yerokhin (Stockholm: Melos, 1994), 64.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Olivier Messiaen by Patrick Szersnovicz on 29 May 1987 in *Le Monde de la Musique* (July/August 1987), 34.

If one of the chief attributes of modernist art is the expression of ambiguity and multiple meaning, then Messiaen's music embodies this richness. Most prominently, the modernist ideal of simultaneously breaking with (yet paradoxically continuing with, or adapting) some traditions of thought, is an important consideration in Messiaen's art. His music synthesised a response to certain nineteenth-century aesthetic characteristics associated with burgeoning modernism such as urbanism, technologism and dehumanisation, as well as refining other modernist characteristics such as complexity, discontinuity and temporal concerns, primitivism, eroticism, cosmopolitanism and experimentalism.<sup>7</sup>

From these categories it is evident that there is a chasm between the conservative nature of Catholicism, and the radical worlds of modernism and modernity. Messiaen bridges this abyss between faith and art through his writings, his imagery and the epigraphs used in his scores, which effectively, and crucially transfigure the reception of his modernist music as Christian music. We only need to compare Messiaen's apparently non-religious pieces as *Thème et variations* for violin and piano (1932), *Fantaisie burlesque* (1932), *Pièce pour le Tombeau de Paul Dukas* (1935, rev.1997 by Yvonne Loriod-Messiaen), *Rondeau* (1943), *Cantéyodjayâ* (1949) *Quatre études de rythme* (1949-50) to his explicitly religious works, like the *Visions de l'Amen* (1943), to perceive how powerful the use of religious imagery is.

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<sup>7</sup> Harris, Wendell. V., 'Modernism', *Dictionary of Concepts in Literary Criticism and Theory* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992), 238-39.

Messiaen is therefore fundamentally a religious modernist (a surrealist juxtaposition in itself), whose art embodies the dichotomy that this implies. Modernity is sublimated in Messiaen's music 'by image, [and] by symbol'.<sup>8</sup> If Messiaen could subvert modernity by infiltrating it with the message of the Catholic faith, and by using the expressive possibilities of modern music, he could potentially effect the redemption of humanity. In doing so, Messiaen's naïvety attempts to make whole a divided modernity by emotional communication with a secular humanity. This is why his message does not change - the same imperative existed in the 1930s as in the 1990s.

Yet such a project seems anything but naïve. Perhaps it is naïve in its hope of success and in its use of symbolism, but the effect is carefully calculated. Moreover, the conviction inherent in Messiaen's rhetoric is attractive in a post-modern climate of scepticism and doubt. This sense of certainty has had a profound effect on the Messiaen literature. It has leant it, at worst, a doctrinaire spirit of intellectual and political correctness in its repetition of Messiaen's own statements. His writings have built a fence around criticism that very few writers have attempted to breach. We become tired of the story (as given above on pp. 6-7) ubiquitously recycled in the literature of Messiaen speaking about the influence of his mother, about his first prizes at the conservatoire, about the influence of his teachers, and of his own understanding of his faith, as if these place a caveat on future biographical, musical and aesthetic exploration of his music. Yet, at the same time, no writer can ignore

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<sup>8</sup> Op. Cit., Programme for *St François d'Assise*, 105.



such statements about his music either, particularly when he refers directly to his own naïvety.<sup>9</sup>

The following study is a critical examination of the aesthetic and iconographical sources of inspiration in Messiaen's work, and with the ways in which he imparts them. Throughout the study, I have sought both to expand the significance of material inside the critical fence, and to penetrate the fence from without. In doing this, I have used some ideas and concepts known to the Messiaen literature, but I have used these to a new end to reveal Messiaen's true iconoclasm, and to create a new critical perspective on the origin, style and poetics of his music. By marrying cultural, musical and critical analysis I believe that a more interesting composer is revealed than hitherto.

Each chapter explores an 'extra-musical' element that animates Messiaen's religious-aesthetic outlook. I begin Chapter 1 by revealing Messiaen's connection to a specifically French nineteenth-century tradition of anti-modernist thinking. Thus, I indicate how socio-political ideals, and symbolist notions of catharsis and redemption (from the writings of Josephin Péladan and Joris-Karl Huysmans), are refracted through Charles Tournemire's music and aesthetics, and incorporated by Messiaen into his first compositions in support of his self-proclaimed role of the 'liberator' of humanity. In Chapter 2, both the *acciacatura* technique and *plainchant* (largely ignored in the Messiaen literature), are revealed to be fundamental aspects of his music. The *acciacatura* technique is shown to be at the basis of Messiaen's modes of

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<sup>9</sup> Op. Cit., Undated ms. draft for the programme book for the première of *Visions de l'Amen*, 'Because the author did not know the workings of this language until recently, he exploited them *unwittingly* [*sans le faire exprès*] throughout these years'.

limited transposition, and of his harmonic thinking. Mode is then related to colour, and rhythmic and developmental procedures in his music, to show how Messiaen attempts to posit a unity of discourse. New ideas of ‘tonality’ and development that attempt to describe more accurately the multivalency of Messiaen’s music will be considered, and these will reveal the extent to which Messiaen seeks to obscure the modernity of his music in *Technique de mon langage musical (TMLM)*.<sup>10</sup> In addition, his music will be related to the modernist music of Debussy, Ravel and Stravinsky, all major influences on his music.

Chapter 3 explores the modernity of Messiaen’s music further by showing how he synthesises ideas about the separation of time and eternity from the mediaeval theologian St Thomas Aquinas and the modern philosopher Henri Bergson. Time is posited as the crucible in Messiaen’s aesthetics for the ideal of love (exemplified in the Catholic doctrines of predestination and affiliation). Messiaen adopts these ideals through the writings of Dom Columba Marmion, which are revealed as the inspiration for two major religious-modernist organ works of the 1930s: *L’Ascension* and *La Nativité du Seigneur*. Subsequently, in Chapter 4, I attempt to show how Messiaen subsumes surrealist ideals of art and love in his aesthetics, to engender a religious-modernist poetics. Beginning with the texts and music of his songs, the absorption of Surrealism will be shown to be the major factor in the increasing modernist complexity and gesturalism of Messiaen’s music of the 1940s.

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<sup>10</sup> Messiaen, Olivier, *Technique de mon langage musical (TMLM)*, two vols. (I - text, II - musical examples), (Paris: Leduc, 1944), trans. John Satterfield (Paris: Leduc, 1956). All references are to *TMLM*, Vol. I unless otherwise specified.

Messiaen's modernity is discussed in the context of musical colour in Chapter 5, where I discuss the extent to which the writings and paintings of Robert and Sonia Delaunay, the pedagogy of Vincent d'Indy and Marcel Dupré, and Tournemire and Dupré's ideas of organ improvisation are absorbed into Messiaen's music, and how these thinkers engender an increasing freedom in the evolution of Messiaen's forms and material. In Messiaen's aesthetics, this freedom has theological ramifications that are explored through an investigation of his increasingly meretricious use of birdsong. Birdsong represents the apogee of Messiaen's use of colour and dissonance as well as being a metaphor of divine revelation. As such it is an ultra-modernist tool at Messiaen's disposal in his attempt to proclaim his religious and musical mission.

In my final chapter, Chapter 6, I show how Messiaen's music critiques the negative aesthetics of modernity. Through a discussion of the 'Abyss' (a seminal idea in Messiaen's religious aesthetics), as an allegory of modernity, I reveal how Messiaen aims to raise humanity up out of the depths to a realisation of the Glory of God. This trajectory is, after all, the path trodden by the autobiographical figure of St Francis in Messiaen's opera *St François d'Assise*, which brings together many of the concerns discussed in previous chapters.

1 Olivier Messiaen *L'Apparition de l'Église éternelle*  
(copy inscribed to Tournemire)

*au Maréchal Charles Tournemire  
hommage de respect  
et de haute admiration  
Olivier Messiaen*

Olivier MESSIAEN

# Apparition de l'Église Éternelle

pour Orgue

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## Chapter 1: Catholicism and Catharsis

One day, we will render justice to Tournemire<sup>1</sup>

Some time between May 1934 and 1939, Olivier Messiaen gave the composer Charles Tournemire (1870-1939) a copy of his *Apparition de l'Église éternelle* (1932) for organ. Handwritten inside the front cover is an unpublished dedicatory tribute: 'To master Charles Tournemire: homage, respect, and sincere admiration, Olivier Messiaen'; a compliment which indicates Messiaen's profound debt to Tournemire [Fig. 1].<sup>2</sup> The relationship between these two composers is largely shrouded in mystery, and while writers have been aware of a connection between these two men, until now nobody has attempted to expose any *rapprochement*.

Although Messiaen was not a student of Tournemire, before his appointment to La Trinité, he frequented Tournemire's organ loft at Ste-Clotilde.<sup>3</sup> On some of these

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<sup>1</sup> 'Un Jour, on rendra justice à Tournemire'. Messiaen quoted from unnamed source in liner notes for Charles Tournemire's Symphony no. 6 Op. 48, Audivis Valois, V 4757.

<sup>2</sup> This copy was left by Charles Tournemire to his second wife Alice (née Espir) Tournemire (1901-1996) who in turn gave it Mr Dennis Hunt (a friend of Mme Tournemire), who generously gave it to me. *Apparition* was published on 1 May 1934, with new and revised editions published in 1985 and 1993. For further information see Nigel Simeone, *Olivier Messiaen: A Bibliographical Catalogue of Messiaen's works, first editions and first performances* (Tutzing: Verlegt bei Hans Schneider, 1998), 26-7.

<sup>3</sup> Personal interview with Mme Yvonne Loriod-Messiaen on 17 September 1999. Tournemire was appointed *Professeur de Musique d'Ensemble* at the Paris Conservatoire in 1921. Messiaen's extant letters to Tournemire [ed. Joël-Marie Fauquet, 'Correspondance inédite: Lettres d'Olivier Messiaen à Charles Tournemire', *L'Orgue: Cahiers et Mémoires* no. 41 (1989-1), 80-5], reveal the depth of Messiaen's gratitude (Tournemire had been instrumental in gaining Messiaen his appointment at La Trinité). In addition they show that there was an exchange of scores between Tournemire and Messiaen, whom he described as pursuing a 'very pure idea' and having a 'magnificent future'. This

occasions, he and Jean Yves Daniel-Lesur (1908-2002) stood on each side of the console.<sup>4</sup> Although the filial relationship between Daniel-Lesur and Tournemire remains largely unsubstantiated, this image should be taken with some seriousness, for the vision of Tournemire improvising with his biological and spiritual sons on either side of him is indeed tantalising.<sup>5</sup> That Messiaen was admitted to the inner sanctum of the organ loft in this manner reveals that there was indeed a strong bond between these men; a 'respect and admiration' evident in Tournemire's letter of recommendation to the curé of La Trinité, supporting Messiaen's candidature for the post of organist:

I am very particularly interested in a young and magnificent Christian Artist - pure Christian, of a *sound* 'mysticity': Olivier Messiaen[...] ... Olivier Messiaen is only twenty-three years old, his future is *splendid* - and what is even better, much better, he prays and conceives his musical works to the glory of Christ.<sup>6</sup>

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indicates that their relationship was mutually beneficial in terms of musical influence. See Tournemire's review of Messiaen's *Les Offrandes Oubliées* in *Le Courrier Musical* of 15/12/1931, cited in footnote 4 of p. 83 of the above issue of *L'Orgue*.

- <sup>4</sup> In a letter to Tournemire on the 17<sup>th</sup> September 1931 Messiaen writes that 'I am touched by your references [for the post of organist at La Trinité] that favour a musician who has not been your student.' Ibid., Fauquet, 'Correspondance inédite', 82.
- <sup>5</sup> The evidence for this is indeed slim. Apart from Tournemire lavishing attention on Daniel-Lesur, the organist Pierre Moreau, a student of Tournemire's, once said to Mr Dennis Hunt that Lesur was Tournemire's son by the second Alice in Tournemire's life (there were three Alices - a marriage, an affair, and another marriage). The other small piece of evidence is that, according to Mr Hunt, a friend of Mme Alice Tournemire (i.e. the second marriage), this final Mme Tournemire despised Daniel-Lesur and would not speak to him. This perhaps is evidence of her attempt to disown her late husband's illegitimate progeny.
- <sup>6</sup> Tournemire, Charles, Letter of 23/7/31 from the Île de Ouessant off the coast of Brittany, reprinted in Schlee and Kämper, *Op. Cit.*, 141.

Tournemire himself was a profound believer, and almost all of his music (operas, oratorios, symphonies, piano, organ and chamber music) reflects his interest in Christian spirituality and kinship with writers of the late nineteenth-century French Catholic literary revival (Léon Bloy, Josephin Péladan, Jules Barbey D'Aureville, Villiers de l'Isle Adam, Ernest Hello, Joris-Karl Huysmans), the scriptures, liturgy of the Roman Catholic Church and plainchant.<sup>7</sup> He connects Messiaen with this tradition when he states that Messiaen 'comes from a great line of mystics'.<sup>8</sup>

These 'mystics' attempted to express an idealised Catholicism in their work, often in ways that the church itself did not approve. It was commonplace for these writers to bemoan the progressive and positivist nature of modernity, and this stance is echoed by Tournemire in his monograph on César Franck:

Must we still suffer from doubt? An evil, more frightening than paganism!

Does the spirit of the eighteenth century still obstinately stalk us?

Doubt! which Hello calls the 'poison bringing death to all the workings of the mind'.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> In fact a glance at Joël-Marie Fauquet's *Le Catalogue d'Œuvre de Charles Tournemire* (Geneva: Minkoff, 1979) reveals that there are very few Tournemire pieces that do not make reference to these writers.

<sup>8</sup> Op. Cit., Fauquet, 'Correspondance inédite', 83 footnote 4. Tournemire states this in his review of Messiaen's *Les Offrandes Oubliées* in *Le Courrier Musical* of 15/12/1931.

<sup>9</sup> Tournemire, Charles, *César Franck* (orig. pub. Paris: Delagrave, 1931) trans. Ralph Kneeream (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989), 2. Quote from Ernest Hello, *L'Homme: La Vie, La Science, L'Art* (Paris: Victor Palmé, 1872), republished (Paris: Perrin, 1894), and republished (Farnborough: Gregg International Reprint, 1971), 23. On p. 80 Kneeream states that Tournemire replaced the original word 'imagination' with the word *esprit*.

Messiaen likewise bemoans the failure of the Enlightenment to improve the condition of mankind through the rationalisation of science and proposes that faith is the only antidote to the spectre of doubt that haunts modernity:

Scientific research, mathematical proof, amassed biological experiments have not saved us from uncertainty. Quite the contrary, they have increased our ignorance by constantly revealing new realities within what was believed to be reality. In fact, the one sole reality is of a different order: it is to be found in the realm of Faith. Only by encountering another Being can we understand it.

But to do that we have to pass through death and resurrection, and that implies the leap out of temporal things. Strangely enough, music can prepare us for it, as a picture, as a reflection, as a symbol. In fact, music is a perpetual dialogue between space and time, between sound and colour, a dialogue which leads into a unification: Time is a space, sound is a colour, space is a complex of superimposed times, sound-complexes exist at the same time as complexes of colours. The musician who thinks, sees, hears, speaks, is able, by means of these fundamental ideas, to come closer to the next world to a certain extent. And, as St. Thomas Aquinas says: music brings us to God through 'default of truth', until the day when He Himself will dazzle us with 'an excess of truth'. That is perhaps the significant meaning - and also the directional meaning - of music ...<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Messiaen, Olivier, 'Introduction to the Programme Booklet for Paris, 1978', in Almut Rössler, *Contributions to the Spiritual World of Olivier Messiaen* (Duisburg: Gilles und Francke, 1986), 10.



This is one of Messiaen's most important aesthetic statements, and I will return to it in the course of my study. In it Messiaen posits the mediating power of music between the realm of the temporal (worldly) and the atemporal (eternal) [see Chapter 3]. He also believes that through music, and the perpetual dialogue between time, space and colour, one can encounter God and so enter into another reality (see Chapter 4).<sup>11</sup> Moreover, as in the Hegelian tradition of art aesthetics, Art for Messiaen is a mediator of Truth.

Yet for a Catholic like Messiaen 'God is Truth'. When Messiaen states that 'music brings us to God through "default of truth", until the day when He Himself will dazzle us with "an excess of truth"', he not only prefigures the end of his opera, but he indicates that, because modernity has failed, the role of music is to precipitate an awareness in humanity that we must look for our salvation in God. Music for Messiaen has the power cathartically to dazzle or transfigure the individual, 'to pass through death and resurrection [...] to come closer to the next world'. The 'significant and directional meaning' that Messiaen refers to is at once intrinsically eschatological and intensely subjective in that it refers to music's power to intimate the eternal while stimulating a recognisance of God within the individual. Music is therefore a mediator between the soul and God. That Messiaen should choose to do this through the most modern music is one of the most radical aspects of his art that has its *raison d'être* in the aesthetics of the nineteenth-century 'mystics' that Tournemire speaks of.

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<sup>11</sup> This latter idea links Messiaen to the surrealists (see Chapter 4).

These ‘mystics’, like Messiaen and Tournemire, subscribe to the ideal of the artist as the transformer and redeemer of society.<sup>12</sup> In the mission-statement-like preface to the (audaciously titled) *Technique de mon langage musical* (TMLM), Messiaen projects himself as the transformer of society, taking the Wagnerian mantle to new heights:

To express with a lasting power our darkness struggling with the Holy Spirit, to raise upon the mountain the doors of our prison of flesh, to give to our century the spring water for which it thirsts, there shall have to be a great artist who will be both a great artisan and a great Christian. Let us hasten by our prayers the coming of the liberator.<sup>13</sup>

For Messiaen to posit himself as the liberator of humanity is a bold statement indeed from a 36-year-old musician who, had he died at this stage, would probably only be known as a composer of organ music, some songs and a little piano music.<sup>14</sup> He reaffirms his musical mission five years before his death:

I am not a mystic, I am a believer. My mission is to revive the faith in the luminous and positive elements of the Christian religion. To speak of eternity, the unknowable, these are terrible words. All the traits of God are terrible[.] ... The

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<sup>12</sup> This harks directly back to Richard Wagner’s music dramas which spawned a particular French symbolist tradition of thinking in which Tournemire, and ultimately Messiaen were embroiled.

<sup>13</sup> TMLM, 8.

<sup>14</sup> Samuel, Claude, *Eclats/Boulez* (Paris: Centre G. Pompidou, 1986), 10. When asked if Messiaen was respected as a master Boulez replies ‘But no, not at all! At 35, Messiaen was an eccentric, not a grand master, not the respected man of today ... Messiaen was marginal.’

power of music is to express, in a certain measure, those supernatural things that words cannot speak.<sup>15</sup>

Faith is to be revived through art. These concerns were as fundamental to the writers Péladan and Huysmans as to the music of Tournemire. Yet such ideas would only be of ‘academic interest’ if they could not be detected in Tournemire’s and Messiaen’s music; thus the aim of this chapter is to relate Péladan’s and Huysmans’s ideas to two of Messiaen’s earliest compositions: *Le Banquet Céleste* (1928) and *Apparition de l’Église éternelle* (1932).

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<sup>15</sup> Op. Cit., Szersnovicz, 34. In *TMLM* (p. 7) Messiaen states that he has ‘written a good number of religious works - religious in a mystical, Christian, Catholic sense’.

## I

One of the more bizarre cultural presences in Messiaen's 'aesthetic closet' is Joséphin 'Sâr' Péladan, Tournemire's brother-in-law by his first marriage, and the founder of the late-nineteenth-century Rosicrucian (Rose ✕ Croix) movement, part of the Catholic literary revival and the Symbolist art movement.<sup>16</sup> Péladan's missionary zeal and self-appointed hierophantic status is evident even in his early writings. In an early essay '*Le Matérialisme dans l'art*' his tenet was that 'the intimate relationship between art and God has been lost owing to numerous materialistic influences'.<sup>17</sup> This was a tenet that Tournemire took up directly in his book on César Franck where he reflects sadly on the substitution of noise for art:

Now is the time, in this age when the grinding of machines inflames the minds of some and dries up the hearts of many, to glorify Beauty. For it is truly necessary to lose all hope, to fear that expressions of the sublime will no longer sound forth

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<sup>16</sup> Born into a Lyonnais family in 1859, Péladan's intellectual inheritance from his father consisted of royalism, Catholicism, occultism (from his eldest brother Antonin) and a preoccupation with sexuality, all at the disposal of an ardent polemicism. Arriving in Paris in 1881 he took the title of Sâr Mérodack Péladan and the appearance of a wise Chaldean or Assyrian. With money and time at his disposal he became a 'dandy', in the Baudelairian tradition, and began both an association with the authors Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly and Paul Bourget (amongst others), and an extraordinarily prolific literary career (amounting to around 100 books and 500 articles) that lasted until his death in 1918. Jean Da Silva, *Le Salon de la Rose ✕ Croix (1892-1897)* (Paris: Éditions Syros-Alternatives, 1991), 7-9. For a full biographical study see Christophe Beaufils, *Le Sâr Péladan, 1858-1918, biographie critique* (Paris: Aux amateurs de livres, 1986).

<sup>17</sup> Péladan, Josephin, 'Le Matérialisme dans l'art', *Le Foyer, Journal de Famille* no.300 (August 1881), quoted in Robert Pinctus-Witten, *Occult Symbolism in France, Joséphin Péladan and the Salons of the Rose ✕ Croix* (New York, Garland, 1976), 31-2. The Baudelairian call of *épater le*

on earth?

To do so would defy the supreme law which requires from the man of good faith a tribute of admiration *owed to the One who is*.<sup>18</sup>

Tournemire continues with a lengthy quote from Ernest Hello:

Art has completely lost its head. After seeking its models in shadowy regions, after forgetting that the sun is its domain, *after attempting the apotheosis of evil* ... , after trying to separate truth from beauty, it turned against beauty . . .

Having given itself a mortal blow, art wished to end it all. Having persuaded men that disorder, in other words the false, constituted beauty, it cried out, according to its own mad logic: the beautiful is the ugly! ... Greek art was unaware of this folly. Its beauty is to be found entirely in a state of repose ... Art, in order to find this serenity, must rediscover both lofty peaks and profoundest depths. Foam is always moving to and fro, agitated, carried away, impetuous: but the foam is not the ocean.<sup>19</sup>

Such a view was symptomatic of the politically hard-line Catholic right in the period immediately after France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian war. The Church's conservative and anti-republican stance was at odds with the Third Republic which, subject to mediocre leaders and continual scandal, seemed, for men like Péladan, to exemplify the

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*bourgeois* was entrenched in the Catholic literary revival, even though its protagonists, such as Péladan, were themselves eminently bourgeois.

<sup>18</sup> Op. Cit., Tournemire, *César Franck*, 1.

*faiblesse* of mankind, the drudgery of *la vie quotidienne*, and the ‘foam’ of contemporary society.

The polarisation of church and state was aggravated by decrees on congregations and education in the years 1879-86 that inspired a spirit of violent opposition in Catholics and left them with a mistrust of all compromise with the government.<sup>20</sup> A solution would be required that alleviated the grey political landscape and elevated men’s minds. For Péladan, society was in need of redemption; deliverance would only be precipitated by a revolution in art. Such a perspective was unsurprising. One of the features common to members of the Catholic literary revival movement was a mistrust of science and positivism that led to an anti-intellectualism and anti-rationalism, exemplified by Péladan, that focused on belief based on divine or even miraculous revelation.<sup>21</sup> Art was an ideal medium for changing the moral fabric of society not only because of its immediacy and accessibility, stressing the ideal over the intellect, but because Art encompasses ideals of tradition, imagination and transcendence. In his article ‘Le Matérialisme dans l’art’, Péladan concluded that ‘two propositions are incontestable’:

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<sup>19</sup> Op. Cit., Tournemire, *César Franck*, 1-2. Quote from Op. Cit., Hello, *L’Homme: La Vie, La Science, L’Art*, 19-22.

<sup>20</sup> Griffiths, Richard, *The Reactionary Revolution: The Catholic Revival in French Literature 1870-1914* (London: Constable, 1966), 14. This polarisation culminated in the church’s anti-Dreyfus (Jewish) position, *Ligue de la Patrie Française* (1898) and the *Action Française*, founded by Henri Vaugois, joined later by Charles Maurras, who stood for order, anti-individualism, tradition, patriotism, and saw in the Catholic Church one of the main means of achieving these ends. Griffiths, 16.

<sup>21</sup> This topos is likewise evident in the works of Ernest Hello, one of Tournemire and Messiaen’s favourite authors. In addition, the revival of Thomist studies, with their stress on ‘traditional Christianity relying on revelation rather than the intellect, tradition rather than novelty, simplicity rather than complication’ was also symptomatic of this movement. Ibid., Griffiths, 22.

1. Masterpieces of Art are all religious, even among non-believers.
2. For nineteen centuries masterpieces of art have all been Catholic, even for the Protestants.<sup>22</sup>

This thesis is echoed years later by Messiaen: ‘All art that attempts to express divine mystery may be qualified as religious’,<sup>23</sup> and is repeated in Péladan’s *L’Art Ochloraïque* (1888) where he declares: ‘I believe in Ideal, Tradition and Hierarchy’.<sup>24</sup> These were to become tenets of the *Rose & Croix*, a society for symbolist art set up by Péladan, through which the redemption of society would (hopefully) occur.

In his next article in *Le Foyer*, ‘*L’Art Mystique et la Critique Contemporaine*’ the attempt at the reformation of contemporary aesthetics continues with an assertion of the position of artists in society: ‘Therefore however impoverished the execution of mystical painters may be, they are still the greatest painters because all ideal is the mystical ideal.’<sup>25</sup> Form and content are to be subsumed into the mystical ideal: ‘The ideal is not any idea; the ideal is all idea made sublime, carried to its furthest point [*point suprême*] of

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<sup>22</sup> Péladan, Josephin, ‘Le Matérialisme dans l’art’, *Le Foyer, Journal illustré de la Famille*, no. 300 (August 31, 1881), 177-79, quoted in Op. Cit., Pinctus-Witten, 31-2.

<sup>23</sup> Messiaen, Olivier, *Traité de Rythme, de Couleur et d’Ornithologie (1949-1992)* [TRCO], Vol. IV, (Paris: Leduc, 1997), 68. This reprints the *Conférence de Notre-Dame* (Paris: Leduc, 1978).

<sup>24</sup> Birkett, Jennifer, *The Sins of the Fathers: Decadence in France 1870-1914* (London: Quartet, 1986), 138 quoting Péladan, *La Décadence Esthétique, Vol.I: L’Art Ochloraïque, salons de 1882 et 1883* (Paris: Dalou, 1888), 45.

<sup>25</sup> Péladan, Josephin, ‘*L’Art Mystique et la Critique Contemporaine*’, *Le Foyer, Journal illustré de la Famille*, no. 313 (November 20, 1881), 388, quoted in Op. Cit., Pinctus-Witten, 33.

harmony, of intensity, of subtlety'.<sup>26</sup> This notion of art was undoubtedly what caught Péladan's imagination in Wagner's music; seemingly incongruous with Catholicism:

But his [Wagner's] mission was another: to present to the occidental soul the mirrors whereby it has the power to be moved, Wagner had to be exclusively an emotional being. Nobody in historical humanity knew how to act more completely than him; he pushed the aesthetic impression to the point of spasm [*jusqu'au spasme*].<sup>27</sup>

Music could act as a mirror to the human soul, a point of recognisance in which the soul is pushed *jusqu'au spasme* to begin a process of change. For Péladan, music (literally) had a cathartic role in the operas of Wagner.<sup>28</sup> This sort of idealist belief in the transfiguring power of Art and the power of music to reawaken the sublime in the hearts and minds of humanity, and thereby bring about their transfiguration, is an essential component of Messiaen and Tournemire's aesthetics of music.

For Péladan, the problem remained of how this aesthetic was to be promulgated to the general public. Having begun with articles, his literary career proper started in earnest with the twenty-one (3x7) moralist novels of *La Décadence Latine* which included the subjects of the Myth of the Androgen and the *femme fatale*, homosexuality (gay and

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<sup>26</sup> Op. Cit., Péladan, *La Décadence Esthétique*, Vol.1: *L'Art Ochloratique, Salons de 1882 et 1883*, 156.

<sup>27</sup> Péladan, Josephin, *Le Théâtre Complet de Wagner: Les XI Opéras scène par scène avec notes Biographiques et Critiques* (Paris: Slatkine, 1981), (First pub., Paris: Chameul, 1895), xi.

<sup>28</sup> Péladan made it known that his vision of the *Rose \* Croix* occurred during a performance of *Parsifal* in Bayreuth in 1888.



lesbian), cruelty and perversity.<sup>29</sup> These formed an allegorical attack on the moral, material and social penury of the Third Republic and the menace of positivism.<sup>30</sup> Péladan's Manichaeist theosophy was based on the ideal that art (and society) could be reborn by (Christian) purity founded on the knowledge and rejection of perversity. To provoke obsessions in order to condemn them required an art that was both grotesque and blasphemous, even as Péladan deplored these things.

The dialectic between decadence and spirituality is a diremptive attempt to provoke and eventually change humanity (assuming of course that people want to read his books) - a sort of aversion-therapy that is designed to confront the reader with his own human vice, precipitate a realisation of his fallen state (and that of a society that has lead him to this spiritual Golgotha) and open him to a conversion to Christianity.<sup>31</sup>

Péladan's aesthetic project is exemplified in Alexandre Séon's frontispiece for the second edition of his novel *Le Vice Suprême* (1884) [Fig. 2]. His severed head is nailed to a cross, with the words **FINIS LATINORUM** carved in stone at his feet.<sup>32</sup> The cross is on a hill at Bas-Meudon - representing Calvary overlooking a desecrated Paris.<sup>33</sup> This vision of Paris in ashes can be interpreted as an allegory of moral decay. What Séon and Péladan are saying here is that the French, a Latin race, will only be saved through Péladan's leadership. As in Wagner's *Parsifal* where the choir sings *Erlösung dem*

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<sup>29</sup> Op. Cit., Da Silva, 19.

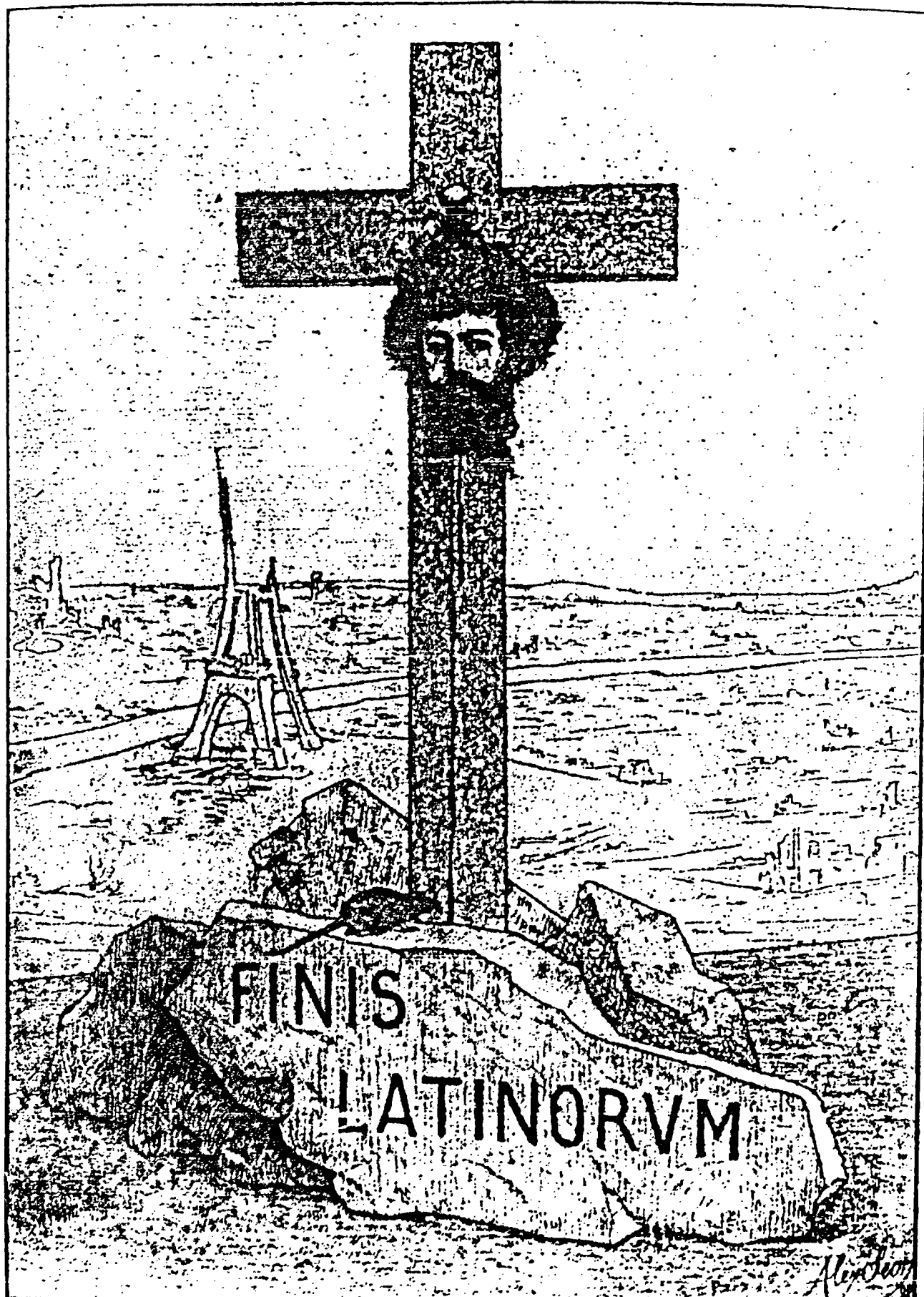
<sup>30</sup> Op. Cit., Da Silva, 22.

<sup>31</sup> One can see here why Péladan liked *Parsifal* so much. It is not too far fetched to imagine that Péladan saw himself as the 'holy fool' who would baptise the repentant (Kundry) and restore and make whole French society (Knights of the Grail).

<sup>32</sup> For a description of this novel see Op. Cit., Birkett, 145-47.

<sup>33</sup> Op. Cit., Da Silva (quoting Péladan), 20.

Fig. 2 Alexandre Séon frontispiece for Péladan's *Le Vice Suprême*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (1891). Catalogue du Salon de la Rose + Croix (1892)



Alexandre Séon, dessin pour la couverture de la deuxième édition du *Vice suprême*, 1891. catalogue du Salon de la Rose + Croix, 1892.

*Erlöser* [Redemption to the Redeemer], Péladan sees himself being redeemed through redeeming others.<sup>34</sup> Modesty aside, he is projecting himself as a contemporary Christ, who through suffering will redeem the sins of the whole world.<sup>35</sup>

The expiation of sin to precipitate redemption is at the hub of Péladan's egoistic iconoclasm. Tournemire's idealistic pleading for the reintroduction of beauty into art and Messiaen's advocacy of faith as the panacea to modernity can all be detected in the philosophy and intent of Péladan's Rosicrucianism. If Péladan was to be a Christ-like redeemer, he needed disciples, and so he formed (with several others) the 'conseil occulte des douze de la Rose-Croix kabbalistique' in May 1888.<sup>36</sup> As early as 1890, the group began to split, and in 1891, Péladan formed his own *Rose ✱ Croix Esthétique*.

Péladan's vision of a quasi-religious order goes back to his novel *Le Vice Suprême* where the monk Alta exposes to the princess d'Este his grand idea of 'The

<sup>34</sup> ' "Redemption to the Redeemer". Such is the celestial and final cry of the most pure masterpiece [*chef-d'œuvre*]. This cry contains all religion and all magic; it is the complete truth in three words. The saviours [*sauvers*] alone will be saved; the artists are the saviours because we are called to thought of the Eternal by the Beauty which is one of the names of God and the most evident manifestation of the world of the body.' Op. Cit., Péladan, *Le Théâtre complet de Wagner*, 'Introduction' by Jean-Pierre Bannerot (President of the Péladan society) quoting Péladan from the catalogue of his 'Sixième salon' (Paris: Georges Petit, 1897), 9. In *Le Constitutionnel* on 16 September 1884 (p. 2), Barbey d'Aurevilly wrote that: 'The author of *Le Vice Suprême* has within himself the three things most hated at present. He has aristocracy, Catholicism and originality'. There is a first edition of this book with a handwritten dedication to Huysmans (3 October 1884) in the Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal: 8° Lambert 517.

<sup>35</sup> Op. Cit., Birkett, 23-5. It is little wonder that the Catholic Church formed a congress in Malines (Belgium) in 1891 to denounce Baudelaire, Barbey d'Aurevilly, Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, Paul Verlaine and Péladan, amongst others who dishonoured the faith.

<sup>36</sup> Péladan also became 'rédacteur littéraire' for the journal *L'Initiation* - a philosophical umbrella journal for 'Haut-Études', hypnotism, theosophy, free masonry, occult sciences, alchemy, Buddhism and experimental research into spiritualism, magnetism and hypnotism. Op. Cit., Da Silva, 34.

foundation of an independent intellectual order of poets, artists and scholars [*savantes*], an army of the Word; imposing itself, by force of the ‘masterpiece’ [*chef d’œuvre*] and the mark of Catholicism, on all manifestations of human genius!’<sup>37</sup> However Péladan, in the light of the prevailing cult of ‘Le Wagnérisme’, pretended that the idea of forming the ‘trois ordres de la Rose ✕ Croix, du Temple et du Graal’ occurred during three performances of Wagner’s *Parsifal* that he attended in Bayreuth in 1888.<sup>38</sup> It was the aspects of mysticism, eroticism and redemption in *Parsifal* that excited Péladan and empowered him to pretend that the *Rose ✕ Croix* was a spiritual quest and aesthetic crusade: ‘The artist must be a knight in armour engaged, at the base, in a symbolic quest for the Holy Grail, a crusade leading a perpetual war against the bourgeoisie’.<sup>39</sup> Péladan explained the aims of the new group:

To insufflate theocratic essence into contemporary art, especially aesthetic culture, such is our new path. To ruin the notion attached to facile execution; to extinguish methodological dilettantism, to subordinate *the arts to Art*, that is to

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<sup>37</sup> Péladan, Josephin, *Le Vice Suprême* (Paris: Chameul, 1884), 341; cited in Op. Cit., Da Silva, 36. ‘La Fondation d’un tiers ordre tout intellectuel de poètes, d’artistes et de savantes, une armée du Verbe; imposant par la force du chef d’œuvre et du document le sceau catholique à toutes les manifestations du génie humaine!’

<sup>38</sup> This resulted in *Le Théâtre complet de Wagner*, Op. Cit. In this work Péladan writes: ‘Mais j’entendis trois fois *Parsifal*, et ce furent trois embrasements de mon zèle, trois illuminations. Je conçus alors et du même coup, la fondation des trois ordres de la Rose-Croix, du Temple et du Graal, et la résolution d’être au théâtre littéraire l’élève de Wagner, non pas seulement par la méthode de composition, mais en transposant la technique musicale dans l’exécution d’écriture’, xii.

<sup>39</sup> Péladan, Joséphin, *L’Art idéaliste et mystique, doctrine de l’ordre et du Salon des Rose ✕ Croix* (Paris: Chamuel, 1894), 283. New edition modified and augmented preceded by *La Réfutation esthétique de la Taine* (Paris: Sansot, 1909), 339; Op. Cit., Da Silva, 38.

say, to return to tradition which regards the ideal as the single aim of the architectonic, the pictorial or plastic effort.<sup>40</sup>

Péladan's 'society' became official on 23 August 1891 with the announcement in *Les Petites Affiches* (item 9256) of its rule and statutes. It aspired to 'magnify beauty and to illuminate [*de faire corruser*] the ideal' through 'the organisation of art expositions [*des beaux-arts*]'.<sup>41</sup> The salons of the *Rose ✱ Croix* were to take place annually at various locations in Paris from 1892-97.<sup>42</sup>

The central document of the *Rose ✱ Croix* is the 'Rules of the Salon of the *Rose ✱ Croix*'. Not only is this manifesto xenophobic, misogynist, patriarchal, and intellectually pretentious but it is not even consistently so. Its first edict states that 'the Order of the *Rose ✱ Croix du Temple* is now enlarged to encompass the *Rose ✱ Croix esthétique* order to restore the cult of the ideal in all its splendour, with tradition as its base and beauty as its means'. The second tenet of the document states that 'the *Salon de la Rose ✱ Croix* wants to ruin realism, reform Latin taste and create a school of idealist art'. However, the crux of Péladan's project is contained in the fifth tenet: 'the order favours first the

<sup>40</sup> Péladan further proclaims the infallibility of the Sâr (himself) and calls upon Balzac, Wagner and Delacroix to intercede on his behalf with God. An aesthetic holy war is to be waged under the banner of *Ad Rosam per crucam, ad crucem per rosem, in ea, in eis gemmatus resurgam*. Op. Cit., Pinctus-Witten, 89.

<sup>41</sup> Op. Cit., Pinctus-Witten, 50.

<sup>42</sup> Péladan was not without his critics, most notably Gustave Geffroy, Max Nordau (See Op. Cit., Pinctus-Witten, 164-5) and Joris-Karl Huysmans who in his novel *Là-bas* (1891) describes Péladan as 'mage de camelotte' and the 'bilboquet du Mide'. Péladan hoped in the end for an abbey for the Rosicrucian order; this Mont Salvat being foiled by his detention by Belgian customs officials (Belgians incurred his wrath in subsequent writings) in November 1893 when he was supposed to meet a rich American sympathiser (See Pinctus-Witten, 167).

Catholic Ideal and Mysticism. After Legends, Myth, Allegory, the Dream, the Paraphrase of great Poetry and finally all Lyricism, the Order prefers work which has a mural-like character, as being of superior essence.’ He then goes on to state which subjects are welcome. These include Catholic dogma, oriental theogonies, expressive and decorative allegory and the nude study if it is beautiful (this obviously contradicts proscribed naturalism). In sculpture, he allows ionic harmony, Gothic subtlety and the intensity of the Renaissance.<sup>43</sup> He asserts the exalted place of the fugues of Bach and Porpora, the quartets of Beethoven, *Parsifal*, César Franck (‘the greatest French musician since Berlioz’) and Erik Satie (adopted as a Rosicrucian composer). The document finishes by announcing a solemn mass on the 10<sup>th</sup> of March at Saint Germain l’Auxerrois at which music from *Parsifal* ‘by the super-human’ Wagner will be played and the ‘mass will be preceded by three fanfares of the Order composed by Erik Satie for harp and trumpet.’<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Péladan strongly identified with *quattrocento* (Italian) art. This ideal was promulgated earlier in the nineteenth century in the work of the Nazarene painters Peter von Cornelius (1783-1867), Friedrich Overbeck (1789-1869), and Franz Pforr (1788-1812), who, working in a disused monastery outside Rome, attempted to revive the working practices of mediaeval Germany and Renaissance Italy. Their style is marked by strong outlines and colours. They in turn had a great influence on the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood, founded in 1848, the major figures being Holman Hunt, John Millais and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. This was a reaction to Victorian sentimentality, aiming to reintroduce artistic integrity by appropriating Italian painting. Likewise, this featured strong outlines and colours to depict mythical or biblical subjects. Several of the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood were invited to exhibit at the *Rose ✱ Croix* salons between 1892-97.

<sup>44</sup> Op. Cit., Pinctus-Witten, 211-16, from Péladan’s *Salon de la Rose ✱ Croix, Règle et Monitoire* (Paris: Dentu, 1891). Messiaen played Satie’s *Messe des Pauvres* (1893-5), a Rosicrucian work, in the 20<sup>th</sup> concert of *La Sérénade* at La Trinité on 14 March 1939. He also gave the première of Claire Delbos’ *Paraphrase sur le jugement dernier* (1939), and he played six pieces from *La Nativité*. I am grateful to Nigel Simeone for this information.

It is easy to dismiss Péladan as a pretentious figure who sought to transfigure and redeem the modern world, holding on to the Catholic church's coat-tails with one hand and Wagner's with the other in order to gain some semblance of credibility and authority. Yet, even as a character whose originality was less marked than his eccentricity, his idealism, Catholicism, lyricism, love of legends, myth, Gothic architecture, Franck and Wagner all confirm his presence in Tournemire and subsequently in Messiaen's aesthetics.<sup>45</sup>

The ideal of the cathartic change and restoration of society through Art so prominent in Péladan's aesthetics, dominates the series of *fin de siècle* autobiographical novels by Joris-Karl Huysmans (*Là-Bas*, *En Route*, *La Cathédrale* and *L'Oblat*).<sup>46</sup> The

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<sup>45</sup> Some of these aspects are not named in Messiaen's list of influences in *TMLM*. Franck was the founder of the symphonic school of organ composition without which Messiaen's music probably could not have come into being. Moreover, Messiaen composed partly as a reaction against this school. Messiaen always spoke of the influence of fairy tales (especially those by Madame d'Aulnoy) and the mythical and magical characters in Shakespeare's plays that he says he acted for his younger brother in his childhood. These were essential to his love of mystery and ultimately the Catholic faith. See *Olivier Messiaen: The Music of Faith*, London Weekend Television (LWT) 1986, Transcript p. 6 and 10.

Péladan's (and Wagner's) influence may also be detected in Tournemire's *La Queste du Saint-Graal*, fresque pour orchestre et chœur (féminin) invisible Op. 54, 1926-27 (perf. 1930). There is also an unrealised project *La Tragique Histoire de Semiramis*, légende tragique, 4 acts, livret de Tournemire d'après Péladan (v.1920) (source: J. Péladan, *Semiramis*, Paris: Mercure de France). In addition Tournemire wrote *La Légende de Tristan* (3 acts and 8 tableaux) Op. 53 in 1925-26. Messiaen wrote a Tristan-trilogy consisting of *Harawi*, *Turangalila-Symphonie* and the *Cinq Rechants*. Yet another connection is Tournemire's work *Apocalypse de St-Jean*, trilogie sacrée pour orchestre, grand orgue, chœur, récit. Op. 63. Messiaen frequently used texts from St. John the Divine (the book of Revelation in *The Bible*), including the text for *Le Banquet Céleste*, his first published work.

<sup>46</sup> He is best known today for his novel *À rebours* [Against Nature], which espouses the themes of decadence and neurosis in art. The principal character, des Esseintes, is a Baudelairian dandy who

subject of these novels is the spiritual progress of the main character Durtal; from Satanism (*Là-Bas*), through his tentative approach and cathartic conversion to Christianity (*En Route*), his burgeoning spiritual awareness in the shadow of Chartres Cathedral (*La Cathédrale*), to his eventual placement as an oblate in a Benedictine monastery (*L'Oblat*).<sup>47</sup> The last three novels share an obsession with the Middle Ages, Gothic art and architecture, Christianity, plainchant and liturgy, all of which are seminal aspects of Tournemire and Messiaen's aesthetics and music.

In Péladan and Huysmans, the Middle Ages are used to invoke a patriarchal, pre-enlightenment society that pre-dated the curse of materialism perceived to be so prevalent in the French Third Republic. For these writers, the *moyen age* held a topos of spiritual purity and transcendence, manifested in its religious art.<sup>48</sup> It was an austere and heroic

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exudes a Schopenhauerian pessimism about the world. As a rich, neurotic aristocrat, he closes his doors on modern society in order to indulge in private fantasies and the visual arts - the narratives of castration and revenge in Moreau's treatment of the Salomé theme or the fantastic dream visions he experiences in the drawings of Odilon Redon, the Latin decadence in literature, the tales of Barbey d'Aurevilly and Edgar Allan Poe, and the poems of Baudelaire, Verlaine and Mallarmé. When his attempt to escape the modern world becomes life threatening, he must return defeated to the Paris he despises.

<sup>47</sup> Like Durtal, Huysmans became a convert to Roman Catholicism, and eventually became an oblate in the Benedictine Abbey of Ligugé, near Poitiers, in 1901. In the trajectory from sinner to saint, Durtal reminds us of the life of Franz Liszt.

<sup>48</sup> In his prose poem *L'Ouverture de Tannhäuser* (1885) for the *Revue Wagnerienne*, Huysmans described the pilgrims chorus in Wagner's opera as being '... without feminine effusions, without tenderness prayers try hard to obtain by hazardous antics from modern grace a rendezvous reserved for God'. The chorus rolls on 'with a certitude of pardon and a conviction of redemption that imposes itself on the humble souls of the Middle Ages'. Ibid., Griffiths, 240.



age in which vicarious suffering was called for from an élite of 'compatientes' to expiate the sins of the world.<sup>49</sup>

Such a jejune view of this period is at the base of Péladan's *Rose & Croix* as well as Huysmans's novels and Catholic writings. In Huysmans's *Sainte Lydwine de Schiedam* (1901) suffering is offered freely by the 'compaciente' for the whole world (rather than individuals) and is inextricably bound up with the communion of saints. Only through prayer and suffering were saints called forth in order to take the world's suffering on their own shoulders and to restore the balance between good and evil (a major theme of Huysmans's writings). Saints are therefore required even more urgently in Huysmans's materialistic epoch than in the Middle Ages.<sup>50</sup> Durtal is thus called forth, through suffering and divine grace, to be a neophyte and, eventually, after a visit to the monastery of Solesmes, the home of the late nineteenth-century plainchant revival, to take orders in a monastery.<sup>51</sup>

Durtal is a Baudelairian *flâneur* who above all seeks to escape modern life and *ennui* of *la vie quotidienne*.<sup>52</sup> Although unsure of himself he is attracted to Christianity through its exotic trimmings - the mysticism of plainchant, the daily obligations of the liturgy, and the splendour of Gothic and Romanesque buildings. Cradled in this

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<sup>49</sup> 'The exalted unity of art and religion is ... largely a romantic projection into the past of the desire for organic, nonalienated relations between men, for doing away with the universal division of labour'. Theodor W. Adorno, 'Theses Upon Art and Religion Today', *Notes to Literature*, Vol. 2, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson (New York: Columbia, 1992), 293.

<sup>50</sup> Op. Cit., Griffiths, 185-7.

<sup>51</sup> Tournemire owned and read Huysmans's novels. It was probably under the spell of these novels that Tournemire, like Durtal, visited the monastery of Solesmes.

<sup>52</sup> Huysmans, Joris-Karl, *Pages Catholiques* (Containing selected sections of *En Route* and *La Cathédrale*), (Paris: Plon, 1899), 250 (from *La Cathédrale*).

atmosphere he realises slowly that he has lived a sinful and destructive life. Yet, the problem remains of how to reform himself and to rationalise his antipathy and fear of Christianity. The reader is presented with an exemplar of a character, slowly being caught hook, line and sinker on the fishing line of Roman Catholicism and being ineluctably reeled in. During this process, the cathartic realisation of his former existence precipitates his redemption through confession and the mass: an act of communion with God.

The message of Huysmans's project is clear: only through the realisation of mortal vice can contemporary humanity understand its fallen state. Durtal is a symbol of humanity and its need for a cathartic transformation and redemption as much from worldly vice as from modernity itself (symbolised by Paris in Huysmans's novels). For men like Péladan and Huysmans, society stands in need of such a restoration, and only through art (whether it is architecture, painting or music) can such a transformation take place. Such a project had a profound influence on the religious art of Charles Tournemire, an avid reader of Huysmans, and consequently on that of Olivier Messiaen.

## II

In addressing the question of influence it is necessary to ask whether there is a link between the music of Tournemire and Messiaen and thinkers such as Péladan and Huysmans. Does one really hear their music as 'religious music' and in what sense? These fundamental questions have been ignored in the literature and go straight to the heart of 'le cas Messiaen', a debate which centred on the apparent dichotomy of the extreme sensuality and extreme Catholicism in his *Trois Petites Liturgies de la Présence*

*Divine* (1945), and the issue of whether Messiaen's 'mystico-poetic commentaries' accompanying this work were a distraction, an irrelevance or worse.<sup>53</sup>

What one hears in the music of Messiaen (and Tournemire) are luscious harmonies and voluptuous textures that carry with them all of the epicurean, hedonist sensuality and eroticism that music can muster.<sup>54</sup>

My secret desire for enchanted gorgeousness in harmony has pushed me toward those swords of fire, those sudden stars, those flows of blue-orange lavas, those planets of turquoise, those violet shades, those garnets of long-haired arborescence, those wheelings of sounds and colours in a jumble of rainbows of which I have spoken with love in the Preface of my *Quatuor pour la fin du Temps*; such a gushing out of chords should necessarily be filtered; it is the sacred instinct of the natural and true harmony which, alone, can so charge itself.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> This is a reference to the furore in the press following the performance on 21 April, 1945 of *Trois Petites Liturgies de la Présence Divine*. Antoine Goléa subsequently wrote a polemical article in favour of Messiaen called 'le cas Messiaen', in *Le Littéraire* (13 April, 1946). The argument over Messiaen's *Liturgies*, inflamed by typical French-press hype and hyperbole, was essentially concerned with his audacity at writing such blatantly religious music, using instruments usually associated with secular music, to profess his faith, and his employment of such a hedonistic musical and textual language in doing so. See also Lilise Boswell-Kurc's *Olivier Messiaen's religious war-time works and their controversial reception in France (1941-1946)* (PhD. diss., New York University, 2001).

<sup>54</sup> One can also hear this in the music of Tournemire's students Jean Yves Daniel-Lesur (1908-2002), Maurice Duruflé (1902-1986) and Jean Langlais (1907-1991). Messiaen's students have taken up his mantle in quite different ways, being influenced by the notion of colour and its application to music.

<sup>55</sup> *TMLM*, 52.

Such idealism reminds us of Péladan's edict that Wagner's music pushes the listener (emotionally) towards spasm, and indeed one can say the same of Messiaen's aims here. He attempts to move the listener to experience the deepest sense of emotional awareness, and through the connection to religious text and images, to link feelings of awakening (whether musical, emotional, spiritual or a combination of all of these) with spiritual transformation. Suzanne Demarquez, an early reviewer of Messiaen's music, seemed to have been only too aware of this:

In *L'Ascension* Olivier Messiaen has sought, as in certain previous works, to fire the spirit [*frapper l'esprit*] of his listeners, by all means ... [.] He has, simply, sincerely exposed the mystical ideal which it possesses, and it is in this that his work is stirring [*émouvante*] ...<sup>56</sup>

Immediately one thinks of Péladan's edict that 'Therefore however impoverished the execution of mystical painters may be, they are still the greatest painters because all ideal is the mystical ideal',<sup>57</sup> and the fifth tenet of the *Rose & Croix*: 'the order favours first the Catholic Ideal and Mysticism'. These notions of firing the spirit, pursuing an idealistic mission and communicating with his audience are central preoccupations of Messiaen's music, hence the eminently approachable nature of his music and the layers of information in the form of the titles of the works, epigraphs and information provided in notes to the works that effectively act to categorise his music as religious.

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<sup>56</sup> Demarquez, Suzanne, *La Revue Musicale*, no. 154 (March 1935), 203-4.

<sup>57</sup> Op. Cit., Pinctus-Witten, 33, quoting Op. Cit., Péladan, '*L'Art Mystique et la Critique Contemporaine*', 388.

But there is a more subtle and at the same time more profound machination in Messiaen's music. Like Péladan (and Alexandre Séon) who wanted art to act as a form of aversion therapy to the wiles of modernity, Messiaen's music uses all the devices and designs of modern music at his disposal in his quest to create a 'music of enchanted gorgeousness' that at the same time saves us from the 'uncertainty' of modernity, and is said to create 'a true music, that is to say, spiritual, a music which may be an act of faith; a music which may touch upon all subjects without ceasing to touch upon God ...'.<sup>58</sup> Understanding that the use of Modernist music to save us from modernity has a cultural tradition and agenda allows us more easily to assimilate a dichotomy that Messiaen's contemporaries and scholars could not understand. How a synthesis of religion and erotic decadence is achieved, and the metaphors that Messiaen uses in his music to achieve this is the subject of the present study.

So practically speaking, how is a decadent musical language created? Although Messiaen considered himself primarily an ornithologist and rhythmician, and discussed rhythm before harmony in *TMLM*, it is perhaps harmony and particularly his modes of limited transposition that are his musical signature. But, at a more basic level, it is the use of added notes (to common triadic harmony) such as degrees of the second, sixth, flat seventh and augmented fourth (all features of Tournemire's harmonic language), and indeed, the addition of other notes, that are said to 'colour' a chord i.e. altering its

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<sup>58</sup> *TMLM*, 8.

resonance in the ear of the listener.<sup>59</sup> The ‘spice’ or ‘perfume’ that Messiaen attributes to these notes purveys decadence in his music.<sup>60</sup>

Yet this in itself would not be enough to achieve the voluptuousness that Messiaen desired. What he was able to do was fuse the idea of modality and polymodality (from plainchant and the music of Maurice Emmanuel [1862-1938], Marcel Dupré [1886-1971] and Tournemire) together with the essential fluid notion of chromaticism, inherited from Wagner, and thus break with, as much as extend, tonality. His modal harmonic language has the flexibility to allow tonal regions or chords to be given prominence for seemingly any length of time or for the briefest moment, or for tonal regions to be held in a contiguous lattice by a mode (see Chapter 2 for more on modes).

In order to aid the suspension of tonality, Messiaen needed a new concept of organising musical time and disrupting the sense of ‘progress’ in his music: a metaphor for the nature of post-Enlightenment civilisation. Slow tempi and harmonic rhythm, the lack of any necessary resolution to chords, and the employment of such devices as Hindu and Greek rhythms (used and discussed in works and treatises by Emmanuel, Dupré and Tournemire) and the manipulation of identifiable musical cells (*personnages rythmiques*), gleaned from Stravinsky’s *Le Sacre du Printemps*, as an alternative or higher form of ‘developing variation’, disrupt the metrical control of barlines and the hegemony of

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<sup>59</sup> Resonance is itself both a technical aspect of Messiaen’s music (discussed in Chapter 2) and an aesthetic aspect when this is linked to the effect of light passing through stained-glass windows. The reference to Gothic windows such as those in Chartres is another connection with Huysmans (especially in *La Cathédrale*). The *pièce terminale* of *L’Orgue Mystique* no. 14 (*La Quinquagesime*) is entitled *Verrière* ([stained-glass] window).

devices such as the four-bar phrase.<sup>61</sup> The aim of this was to affect a sense of atemporality as a metaphor for eternity in which the listener could in effect die to the world and be reborn in an alternative musical reality - an intimation of the beyond.

Messiaen's synaesthetic appreciation of chords (he saw colours when he heard sound) relates directly to this notion of eternity. Colour, such as that which streams through Gothic stained-glass windows (another link to Huysmans's *La Cathédrale*) or the colours of the New Jerusalem (described in the Apocalypse) are a metaphor for the dazzling light of Christ that will penetrate humanity after death. Music becomes a way of seeing this on earth and bringing humanity to a fulfilment and redemption. By freeing music from the rule of the worldly and temporal, chords (colours) are freed up in time to form associative relations with each other. This is what Messiaen means by the colouring of musical time (*Chronochromie*).

What is evident in this brief exposé of Messiaen's technique is that Messiaen synthesised the very old and the very new. Like Tournemire, Péladan and Huysmans, Messiaen looks back to the Middle Ages with rose-coloured spectacles firmly on. They all see this period as a time of pre-subjective, pre-Enlightenment purity in which the humble (and anonymous) artisan would offer up the fruits of his labour in the form of music, art or the architecture of Romanesque and Gothic Cathedrals.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> *TMLM*, 47.

<sup>61</sup> Messiaen, Olivier, 'Le rythme chez Igor Strawinsky', *La Revue Musicale*, no.191 (1939), 91-2.

<sup>62</sup> One of the cultural events that brought this on was the rediscovery during the mid-nineteenth century of plainchant and the foundation of a monastery at Solesmes in Sarthe (Southern France) to transcribe, publish and perform this music written by the anonymous masters. See Katherine Bergeron, *Decadent Enchantments: The Revival of Gregorian Chant at Solesmes* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

From the beginning this took the form of a sort of aesthetic fantasy. The monks of Solesmes (in the department of Sarthe) rebuilt an existing monastery, cladding it in gothic style which became a larger metaphor for how they treated the chant itself, regularising it into an ictus of freely alternating twos and threes. Archaism and the beauty and sense of freedom of such plainchant was essentially what enchanted everyone who visited the monastery (and still does today). Indeed, Solesmes became a veritable Mecca for artistic pilgrimages of writers, artists and composers such as Debussy and Tournemire.

It was this notion of rhythmic freedom and the modality of the chant that inspired Tournemire, after a fair bit of cajoling from other musicians, to write *L'Orgue Mystique*, a Thomine summa of liturgical organ music.<sup>63</sup> Begun in 1926, *L'Orgue Mystique* is a cycle of organ works paraphrasing the plainchant for every Sunday and major feast of the liturgical year, and is published in 51 books each containing five pieces: *Prélude à Introït*, *Offertoire*, *Elévation*, *Communion* and *Pièce Terminale*.<sup>64</sup> As has already been intimated, when Tournemire chose plainchant restituted by the monks of Solesmes, he was really building his musical house on sand. However, it was not the academic accuracy of the texts that interested him or that really mattered, but their aesthetic

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<sup>63</sup> In fact Tournemire's style was changed profoundly by the study and work on this cycle. His music became much richer, realising the modal and chromatic potential latent in his earlier music.

<sup>64</sup> Messiaen participated in a performance of parts of *L'Orgue Mystique*, performing the *Offertoire* from the *Assumption Office* and the *Paraphrase* for Christmas Day, in a concert on the 25th April 1932. Op. Cit., Fauquet, 'Correspondance inédite', 84, footnote 5. He was also present at the premiere of Tournemire's performance of his *Sept chorals-poèmes pour les sept paroles du Christ* Op. 67 in 1938 and in that year wrote an article for the revue *Syrinx* entitled 'Tournemire: l'Orgue Mystique'. Notable in Messiaen's enthusiasm is his mention of the Communion 'for the Feast of the Blessed Sacrement' which he describes as 'ecstasy, mystic love, remarkable use of low octaves'. His



resonances.<sup>65</sup> For Tournemire (and Messiaen) plainchant was the sedimented material of a long-dead society revived and woven into a sonic tapestry, enriched by the resources of ‘modern’ chromaticism to adorn and amplify the archaic topos of this material. The evocation of a lost spiritual world is envisaged through the vice and artifice of contemporary society, manifested in chromaticism, transcended by the original material to become a vision of the eternal kingdom of God. Wrought by man, the wreckage of history that is called ‘progress’ is subsumed as chromaticism in Tournemire’s (and Messiaen’s) music, allowing plainchant to become the instrument by which we can transcend the wiles of modernity and be redeemed.<sup>66</sup> When Tournemire wrote

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remark that Tournemire’s desire to ‘go back to the origin of modality which could not exclude chromaticism’ could equally apply to his own *Le Banquet Céleste*.

<sup>65</sup> Joël-Marie Fauquet believes that ‘Tournemire’s decision to launch himself, ceasing all activity, into the composition of *L’Orgue Mystique*, seems to go back to 1926. In the following year, during the summer, the musician stayed at the abbey of Solesmes, eager to meditate on what he called “merveilleuses impressions plain-chantesques”. In addition, the reading of Dom Guéranger’s *l’Année liturgique* constantly nourished his meditation.’ Liner notes for *L’Orgue Mystique: Anthologie*, Arion 268105, 22.

<sup>66</sup> Tournemire’s pessimism about the ability of art to revive society is reminiscent of that expressed in Walter Benjamin’s ninth thesis which so poetically sums up the pessimism that lies behind Adorno’s aesthetics of modernity. ‘A Klee painting named ‘Angelus Novus’ shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned towards the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.’ Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Fontana, 1992), 249.

By using modern polyphony as clothing, I have always respected the lightness of the Gregorian lines, the fluidity of the aerial paraphrases. Did not Huysmans write 'Plainchant is the aerial and unchanging paraphrase of the immobile structures of Cathedrals'? That is fine. Only, I have been forced to put my stamp on the rhythm of Solesmes: I was obliged to modify much in the case of rhythm, and to give in to imperious exigencies of diverse composers and strong variations that I had undertaken.<sup>67</sup>

he would well have understood the eschatological telos of the original text from Huysmans's novel *En Route*:

Created and elevated by the Church in the choir schools of the Middle Ages, plainchant is the aerial and unchanging paraphrase of the immobile structure of Cathedrals; it is the immaterial and fluid interpretation of the primitives; it is the winged translation and is also the strict and unbending stole of Latin prose that the monks raised up in times past, beyond time, in the cloisters. It is now altered and

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<sup>67</sup> Lespinard, Bernadette, 'L'Orgue Mystique de Charles Tournemire', *Cahiers et Memoires de L'Orgue II*, no. 139 bis (1971), 6. In the preface to each volume of *L'Orgue Mystique* Tournemire wrote: 'Plainchant, truly an inexhaustible source of mysterious and splendid lines - plainchant, triumph of modal art ... Endeavours were made to retain the infinite suppleness of phrasing, incomparable suavity, mystical depth, and also to associate mediaeval garlands with the multiple resources of polyphony, leaving aside the accents which could alter the serenity of this "music of cathedrals"; various forms: interludes, fantaisies, paraphrases, chorales, etc., find their place in this work.'

With this orientation, the author found precious encouragement and retained marvellous impressions of Plainchant from Solesmes Abbey. [...] Though this new organ music is for the adornment of the liturgical offices, it will also be useful for concerts.'

disjointed, vainly dominated by the fracas of the organ, and it sings that God will come!<sup>68</sup>

In the organ music of Tournemire and Messiaen, the drama of the liturgy and the space in which it is conducted is made supra-real. In addition, musical ideas are meant to evoke images: the fracas of trills (the scintillating play of light through stained-glass windows), toccata patterns (the confusion of sound in large buildings caused by their acoustics), chromatic/modal alterations (the grotesque appearance of gargoyles and chimeras), sudden harmonic shifts and the fracturing of the modality and rhythm of plainchant (the obscurity of dark rib vaults and shifting shadows in large cathedrals caused by the rotation of the sun at different times of day and the oscillation of clouds outside).<sup>69</sup> Liturgical movement and the cycles of the day, of the seasons and of our lives are played out inside and against the austere and immobile backdrop of the Gothic Cathedral.

Modernity is both evoked and transfigured through these elements. Modern harmonic resources not only amplify plainchant's anachronistic aesthetic topos but fracture its 'aura' from its liturgical tradition.<sup>70</sup> They radiate the awe and magnificence of

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<sup>68</sup> Op. Cit, Huysmans, 35-6. Tournemire quotes part of this passage, in a *Note de l'Auteur* for his *Symphonie Sacrée* pour Orgue Op. 71 (1936) in *Le Guide du Concert XXII*, Année no. 25 (20/3/1936), 696; quoted in Fauquet, Op. Cit., *Le Catalogue d'Œuvre de Charles Tournemire*, 49.

<sup>69</sup> Adorno writes that these '... devil heads and grotesque figures which adorn the Gothic Cathedrals; these last, through part and parcel of the Catholic *ordo*, plainly express impulses of resistance of the rising individual against this very same *ordo*'. Adorno, 'Theses Upon Art and Religion Today', Op. Cit., 293. A less Marxist view would see them as warnings of worldly vice sedimented and cemented into the 'immobile' fabric of the cathedral.

<sup>70</sup> Benjamin, Walter, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', *Illuminations*, 215.

God and the fractured world of modern alienation. Such modern treatment may be deleterious to the original beauty of plainchant, and as such a metaphor for the failure of modern consciousness to improve upon the strength and certainty of pre-Enlightenment knowledge. Yet, through such rich harmonisations (as found in Tournemire and Messiaen's music) plainchant becomes a metaphor for the beauty, richness and sophistication of modern liturgy, thought and music that contemporary life affords and thus becomes a broader symbol of God's presence in all times.

In Huysmans's tetralogy of novels, plainchant is an eschatological language that speaks to the main character Durtal of transcendence through vicarious suffering. His passionate love of the mystical and of the liturgy, plainchant and cathedrals becomes an obsession and a shelter<sup>71</sup> from '*l'ennui de vivre*' which, for Durtal, is symbolised by Paris.<sup>72</sup> He has willingly left his former life. When asked if he would visit Paris he replies 'No, I left that life without hope of return, I am dead to the world, I do not want to see Paris, I do not want to live again'.<sup>73</sup> Renouncing the world, he understands that, in order to be redeemed, he has taken on the yoke and burden of Christianity.

The notion of retiring from the world is stated in Joseph Bonnet's preface to *L'Orgue Mystique*: 'A master, working in the retreat and meditation indispensable to a creative artist'. It is known that Tournemire composed most of *L'Orgue Mystique* on the lonely island of Ouessant in Brittany, far from the thriving metropolis of Paris. This notion that the creative artist must renounce the world in order to create a work which will transform it can be traced through Durtal and des Esseintes to Wagner and

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<sup>71</sup> Op. Cit., Huysmans, 48.

<sup>72</sup> Op. Cit., Huysmans, 41.

Schopenhauer. Indeed, Messiaen seems to concur with this in a letter to Tournemire on the 4<sup>th</sup> of August 1931 when he states that, 'I understand music much better when I am alone, in the countryside and far from musicians. The organist, alone also with the holy sacrament [*Saint Sacrement*] and his organ, can understand even better.'<sup>74</sup>

This idea of distance becomes important not only in Huysmans, but in the aesthetics of Tournemire and Messiaen. In Huysmans's writings, the distance between the 'Grandes et petites orgues' at opposing ends of a church,<sup>75</sup> Durtal's preference for more tepid and smaller sanctuaries, sanctuaries where traces of the middle ages still exist',<sup>76</sup> his preference for observing events from obscured and isolated parts of churches<sup>77</sup> and for evenings when he feels the solitude, silence and darkness of churches<sup>78</sup> and the shadows of the vaults, are all contrasted with the glories of medieval stained glass - in particular the glories of the windows in Chartres Cathedral at sunrise. These aspects become a metaphor for the distance the 'compatiente' (humanity or contemporary society) must travel on his spiritual road towards salvation.

Only from a transept (of course), does Durtal view the gradual illumination of the building. After the figures in the windows become distinct, in the vaults of the nave, the rose windows and the figures of the Virgin and the Apostles, the Patriarchs and the Saints, he:

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<sup>73</sup> Op. Cit., Huysmans, 219.

<sup>74</sup> Op. Cit., Fauquet, 'Correspondance inédite', 81.

<sup>75</sup> Op. Cit., Huysmans, 55.

<sup>76</sup> Op. Cit., Huysmans, 51.

<sup>77</sup> Op. Cit., Huysmans, 73.

<sup>78</sup> Op. Cit., Huysmans, 76.

felt in himself an answering thrill, the echo of the prayers chanted all round him by these loving souls; and he let himself melt away in the soothing sweetness of the hymns, asking for nothing, silencing his ungratified desires ... thinking only of bidding an affectionate good morning to the mother [Virgin Mary] to whom he had returned after such a long absence of distant wanderings in the land of sin.<sup>79</sup>

Distance is a strategic metaphor for the way in which Durtal has begun the ascetic path of the mystic from sin and degradation in the darkness of modernity, taken upwards and outwards by plainchant, the organ and the great height and magnificence of Gothic architecture to a realisation of his true eternal nature and a oneness with God (n.b. this idea is crystallised in Messiaen's *Apparition de l'Église éternelle* discussed in Part III). For Durtal and Tournemire, the artist must reject the world in order to live more fully - he must (unfortunately) be in the world but not of it. For them, *la vie intérieure* is nourished by a knowledge and transcendence of *la vie contemporaine*. The viewer or listener is invited to leave his cares behind and to enter more fully into an understanding of the eternal nature of his own soul manifested to him through Art. Yet, even while recognising his altered state, the 'compatiente' is required to be mindful, as if in a dream, of his old fallen state. Such a transfiguration is present in Tournemire and Messiaen's use of modalism (discussed in Chapter 2): the old way remains: altered and enhanced yet remaining recognisable.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Op. Cit., Huysmans, 243-44.

<sup>80</sup> This has strong aesthetic resonances with the cor anglais solo in Act III of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* which acts both as a distant memory of the way things were and a reminder of how things have changed.

Inherent in this is the notion that this music is always struggling with its own plastic status of being wrought by human hands. Tournemire's music, much more than Messiaen's, takes up the Beethovenian ideal of the struggle not only for self-realisation through music, but the struggle to raise humanity up through this to a utopian vision of the eternal within itself and in the life beyond. In Tournemire and Messiaen (and in Beethoven) there is always the knowledge that this ideal is somehow doomed to failure - utopia cannot be reached through our 'darkened house of mortal clay' - we are always asymptotically searching for utopia even as we attempt to know it.<sup>81</sup>

The opportunity to grasp at this utopia is given to Durtal, in Huysmans's tetralogy. His spiritual journey of recognition, self realisation, catharsis and redemption occurs through his preparation for the mass, the central act of faith in the Christian Church, where he must recognise Christ as his redeemer and then return to the world of modernity. Through the doctrine of transubstantiation, Roman Catholics believe that the bread and wine become the actual body of and blood of Christ in the mass. By taking the sacraments into one's body, a person becomes at one with the suffering of Christ (and therefore the world) and is redeemed through absolution.

Before his confession Durtal is in the 'abyss of despair'.<sup>82</sup> He acknowledges that he has already committed all of the sins enumerated by the prayer book, and he has not confessed since his first communion many years before. At last 'the hour of expiation

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<sup>81</sup> Here I am thinking especially of Beethoven's 'Hammerklavier' sonata Op. 106. Tournemire frequently cites Beethoven, particularly the element of fantasy in the final string quartets, as an important influence on his music.

<sup>82</sup> Op. Cit., Huysmans, 135.

was near'.<sup>83</sup> Tears stream down his face as he walked to the monastery. Kneeling before the monk who would deliver him of his confession, 'Durtal wished to die rather than to speak; he attempted, nevertheless, to get the upper hand, to check his embarrassment; he unclenched his lips but nothing came out; he was deeply despondent, his head in his hands repressing the tears that felt ready to fall.'<sup>84</sup> While beginning to confess, overwhelmed by the weight of his own faults, Durtal breaks down - 'but I can't', he cried, 'but I can't!'<sup>85</sup> The monk calls a halt to proceedings and tells Durtal of the weight of the Cross that Christ bore - even Christ was aided by a man from Cyrene.<sup>86</sup> Huysmans emphasises that Durtal is the 'compaciente' who must willingly offer himself up for absolution and redemption and, through vicarious suffering, like Christ, bear the cross of the world's sins in order that he/it will be transfigured.

The following day Durtal fulfils his obligation, and the day after this the moment of communion has arrived. Before being communicated, Durtal's feels his anxieties well up into a prayer, 'Saviour, do not move away. Let your mercy curb your justice; be unjust, pardon me; welcome the beggar of communion, the poor soul!'<sup>87</sup> This sycophantic utterance emphasises that the spirit is willing but the lowly condition of humanity is weak. After his communion:

Durtal was in a state of absolute torpor; the sacrament had anaesthetised his spirit in some way. He fell on his knees at his pew, incapable of untangling the power

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<sup>83</sup> Op. Cit., Huysmans, 135.

<sup>84</sup> Op. Cit., Huysmans, 137.

<sup>85</sup> Op. Cit., Huysmans, 137.

<sup>86</sup> Op. Cit., Huysmans, 138.

<sup>87</sup> Op. Cit., Huysmans, 175.





that moved within, incapable of stirring himself or of taking hold of himself. He had, all of a sudden, the impression that he was suffocating, that he lacked air; the mass had finished ...

It was a veritable unconsciousness of the soul; he lost consciousness, and when it returned to him, he was astonished not to have experienced an unknown flight of joy [*transport inconnu de joie*] ...

... it was the absolution and not the communion which had agitated him. Near the confessor, he had very clearly perceived the presence of the Redeemer; all his being had been, in some way, injected with the divine exhalation, while the Eucharist had only given him a tribute of suffocation and pain ...

... Christ had rendered himself appreciable to his [Durtal's] soul [*sensible à l'âme*], before and not afterwards.<sup>88</sup>

Durtal's resistance to the process of redemption is reminiscent of Wagner's Amfortas (*Parsifal*) who does not wish to re-enact the ritual of the mass, because to uncover the grail causes the wound in his side to ache. Amfortas' wound (like Christ's wound which was delivered by a Roman soldier at Calvary) is a symbol of society's ills and the need of redemption. This wound can only be healed by a redeemer, together with the 'compatiente's' strength of faith. For Péladan 'The Divorce of Art and of religion, of faith and the aesthetic, which began with the Renaissance, is now accomplished. The *rapprochement* between these two powers, Queens of this world and the other, truth and

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<sup>88</sup> Op. Cit., Huysmans, 175-6.

beauty, is the art which is the product of the miracles of Bayreuth'.<sup>89</sup> For him, Wagner has created an ecstatic art that pushes the soul, as Durtal's had been, '*jusqu'au spasme*'.<sup>90</sup> Twelve years after the battle of the Somme, it must have seemed to men like Tournemire and Messiaen that society was more in need of redemption than ever.<sup>91</sup> To push the souls of the individual '*jusqu'au spasme*' and inflame the minds of the collective with a purging spiritual fire was imperative. Tournemire and Messiaen had a considerable cultural heritage to back up their mission of reconnecting the worlds of Art and Religion; the time was ripe for action.

### III

Messiaen's *Le Banquet Céleste* (1928) and *Apparition de l'Eglise éternelle* (1932) were his first two major statements on this front. As we shall see both works take on the notions of cathartic self realisation and redemption. In the late 1920s both Messiaen and Tournemire may have been conscious of the predictions made by the Virgin at La Salette, some 70 years before. She foretold of the destruction of many millions of people, the piling up of ruins of all types at frequent and repeated intervals, all to expiate the sins of the world.<sup>92</sup> The 'War to end all Wars' would be but a curtain-raiser, a trifle in

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<sup>89</sup> Op. Cit., Péladan, *Le Théâtre complet de Wagner*, xviii-xiv.

<sup>90</sup> Op. Cit., Péladan, *Le Théâtre complet de Wagner*, xi.

<sup>91</sup> The battle of the Somme took place from July to November 1916. Over a million men were killed or wounded. Messiaen's Father (Pierre) was away from home during the war which helps to explain Messiaen's closeness to his mother.

<sup>92</sup> Paraphrased from *Charles Tournemire ou Le Mythe de Tristan* by Pascal Ianco (Geneva: Éditions Papillon, 2001), 90. Messiaen mentions the disturbing prophesy of La Salette in Claude Samuel

comparison to the apocalyptic disaster that would occur in the 1930s. Such predictions must have had a profound effect on Tournemire and the young Messiaen. It is not beyond the realms of possibility to attribute to this the change in Tournemire's musical language in the 1920s; it became chromatically and modally richer, and momentarily turned aside from symphonic, operatic and orchestral music, to the intimacy and grandeur of *L'Orgue Mystique*. Little wonder then that the young Messiaen absorbed Tournemire's apocalyptic asceticism and chose the organ as the medium of his first published work.<sup>93</sup>

But there are other reasons why they both chose the organ to evangelise this aesthetic. Obviously, Tournemire and Messiaen were both ardent proponents and advocates of the instrument and its role in the liturgy of the Catholic church. The organ, more than an orchestra, has the unique qualities of sustained tone, and its variety of timbres and its position in resonant ecclesiastical buildings, high above the congregation, allows it a drama and majesty.<sup>94</sup>

What is more interesting is to speculate on the influence of this instrument on Messiaen and Tournemire's language, particularly in the two pieces under discussion. For now, I will say that certain timbres on the instruments, most notably the undulating *voix céleste* sound (used in *Le Banquet Céleste*) and the sound of reeds (in *Apparition*), with their extraordinarily rich spectrum and development of harmonics (evident in the

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*Permanences d'Olivier Messiaen* (Paris: Actes Sud, 1999), 151. He speaks of the Jews returning home at the end of time, and that this time had come.

<sup>93</sup> Looking a little further back, this apocalyptic vein in Tournemire's music can be detected in the opera *Les Dieux sont Mortes* (1910-12), first performed on the 19<sup>th</sup> of March 1924 at the Palais Garnier, which promotes the idea that when all the pagan Gods are dead, Christ will return.

<sup>94</sup> In both Ste-Clotilde and La Trinité the organ is high up on the wall at the west end (the opposite end from the altar).

Cavaillé-Coll instruments played by Messiaen and Tournemire at Ste-Clotilde and La Trinité respectively), allow the player the possibility of exploring some extremely rich and dissonant harmonies. Chords that would perhaps sound ridiculous in other musical media are transformed by the organ's timbre and the building's acoustic. In particular, as we shall see in the next chapter, chords that contain elements of triadic harmony, and can multivalently suggest different harmonic roots and even tonalities at the same time, work very well on the organ because of the instrument's resonance in a church such as La Trinité. With the organ Messiaen therefore had a great foundation for harmonic experimentation and improvisation (see Chapter 5). Had he not been an organist, Messiaen would almost certainly not have developed the colourful harmonic language that had such a profound effect on composers such as Pierre Boulez, Gérard Grisey, Tristan Murail, Jean-Louis Florentz and other students of Messiaen.<sup>95</sup>

Much of the drama of both pieces is effected by the changing colours of rich harmonies used in extremely slow tempi and written for large acoustical/ecclesiastical spaces in which they are given time to resonate. *Le Banquet Céleste* and *Apparition* both involve a large-scale crescendo and decrescendo effect and use both phrase compression and changing levels of harmonic dissonance to inform their climaxes. Both works act as musical metaphors for the soul of the individual (a symbol of humanity) undergoing a transformative process. The 'compatiente' is returned to his mortal life via a decrescendo but, like a rubber band that has been stretched, he is somehow changed.

Both of these pieces are based on the ideal of the chorale. In his book on César Franck, Tournemire hints at the high spiritual stakes inherent in such pieces:

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<sup>95</sup> The ideas of experimentation and improvisation will be returned to in Chapter 5.

The highest expression in organ music manifests itself in the Chorale, and the refined style which follows it is assigned a place of its own. This is not a question of composition (*d'écriture*), its impact is most elevated, and it is the result of a particular state of the soul.<sup>96</sup>

Even more revealing is the following statement:

If the Protestant Chorale of inestimable plastic value, had inspired musicians of the stature of Scheidt and Bach, could not Gregorian chant, altogether richer, perhaps give birth to a new art, supported by polyphony and polytonality?

To penetrate this musical temple of the angelic lines, necessitates prolonged religious and mystical preparation [*mystique prolongée*]. The light at first discrete, brightens faintly; but the addiction to the chant *par excellence* of the church is an adorable thing. Imperceptibly, the soul is illuminated. A profound emotion is felt when an antiphon or an alleluia is heard. *Voilà* the door is open to the sonic edifice where the incense rises up ... The eternal entices to God (*Lui*) [a] legion of Christian artists, so that they may purify contemporary art and carry in this knowledge and faith!<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Op. Cit., Lespinard, 'L'Orgue Mystique de Charles Tournemire', 22. Before writing *L'Orgue Mystique*, Tournemire's only other significant organ piece was the *Triple Choral* (1910) dedicated to Franck. Franck's *Trois Chorals* (1890) for organ used the chorale as the basis for extended developmental poems. The idea of the chorale haunts Franck and Tournemire from Beethoven (especially the late Quartets) and obviously from Bach.

<sup>97</sup> Tournemire, Charles, 'Des possibilités harmoniques et polytonales unies à la ligne grégorienne', *Revue Grégorienne*, Année 15, no. 15 (September/October 1930), 174.

Written in 1930 this seems beautifully to set out the spiritual and aesthetic projects of Tournemire and Messiaen and in particular that of *L'Orgue Mystique*. The corroboration between his 'legion of Christian artists' and Péladan's 'army of the Word' is striking. One is left in no doubt that (as with Huysmans's character Durtal and Péladan's project) the goal is to transform art and the individual from within, using such aspects as plainchant as the sedimented material of a pre-Enlightenment and pre-rationalist society elaborated by the most modern polymodality.

The spirit and often the letter of the chorale dominates *L'Orgue Mystique*, especially the quieter and slower movements. In the more fantasmagorical *Pièces Terminales*, chorales often provide plateaux from which to survey the seismic embroidery of the surrounding musical landscape.<sup>98</sup> As works that distil and summarise impressions and emotions from the preceding mass, these *finals* often reach a (tutti) apotheosis towards their conclusion, as in *Le Banquet Céleste* and *Apparition*, and subside to a peaceful denouement. Chorales dominate Messiaen's entire *œuvre* (often as conclusions of works) and radiate an aura of spiritual power, grandeur, and profundity. Whenever it is present, the 'elevated' spirit, if not the letter of plainchant, is present also.<sup>99</sup>

Unsurprisingly therefore, *Le Banquet Céleste* uses the cloth of the chorale to subtly inculcate plainchantesque modality. Commentators have often been lead astray by the significance of the key signature: F# Major. Why does the piece begin and end on C#,

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<sup>98</sup> Messiaen described Tournemire as the 'master of the arabesque'. In Thomas Daniel Schlee's preface to the Universal Edition of Tournemire's *Symphonie-Chorale*.

<sup>99</sup> Chorales are used to express transcendence for example in *L'Offrande oubliées* (1930), *Jardin du sommeil d'amour* (*Turangalila-Symphonie*) [1946-48], *Couleurs de la Cité Céleste* (1963), which

and why does the listener not expect the extremely long final chord to resolve? The answer is that the work is in a plagal form of F# major with C# as the *finalis* of the mode. The final chord then (although a seventh chord) is not a 'dominant seventh' but a 'tonic seventh', which accounts for its affect of finality. Along with the extreme slowness of the work (minim = 13), this C# centricity contributes to the effect of staticism so often attributed to this work by writers. However, it seems to me that staticism is placated throughout the work by an ongoing relationship between the modal *finalis* C# (which also belongs to the tonic chord on F#), harmonies belonging to the second mode of limited transposition, and the diatonic key of F# major, present at the two points of climax (b. 10 and 16-17). This relationship between a tonic and a *finalis* derives from plainchant, such as in the well-known Pentecost hymn *Veni Creator Spiritus* (which ends on the *finalis*), and is found throughout Tournemire's *L'Orgue Mystique*.<sup>100</sup>

Messiaen would probably have heard many such slow pieces improvised by Tournemire in the organ loft of Ste-Clotilde. Certainly the incense-laden atmosphere of Tournemire's music pervades Messiaen's piece. Another more obvious relationship between these composers was in their reliance on a text as inspiration/explanation for their music. All the plainchant melodies in *L'Orgue Mystique* have texts (unwritten in the scores) that are specifically relevant to the precise points in the liturgical year i.e.

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uses the Alleluia for *Corpus Christi*, divided in half like the sacrament, and *La Transfiguration de Notre-Seigneur Jésus-Christ* (1965-9), amongst other works.

<sup>100</sup> In this light see Maurice Duruflé's *Prélude, Adagio et Choral varié sur le thème du "Veni Creator"* Op. 4 for organ (1930) which ends triumphantly on the *finalis*. It also occurs in some of Bach's Chorale Preludes such as *Das alte Jahr vergangen ist* B.W.V. 614.

*Victimae Paschali* (Easter), *Veni Creator* (Pentecost) or *Puer Natus* (Christmas).<sup>101</sup> Many of these texts would have been known to the Pre-Vatican II church congregation when played in the context of the Catholic liturgy. These metaphorical presences underline the fetishisation of plainchant in Tournemire's music, where it becomes an adorned product, semantically reflecting on a long-dead mediaeval (and imaginary) autonomy, while celebrating the ideal of beauty and the presence of God. Its recognisability makes it a contextual art that, even in the liturgy itself, vents its own epigonal status even as it renews itself through its function.<sup>102</sup>

Knowledge of such texts was important to Tournemire, as for Messiaen, as inspiration and for setting the mood of a work. In Dupré's organ class Messiaen would probably have been encouraged, when learning chorale-based works by J.S.Bach, to understand how the text related to the musical material and affect of the piece.<sup>103</sup> Therefore it is more than possible that Messiaen actually used his text not just as inspiration but in his compositions as a sort of wordless chorale.

Messiaen's chosen text for *Le Banquet Céleste* was from the gospel according to St John (6:56): *Celui qui mange ma chair et boit mon sang demeure en moi et moi en lui* (He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him). This is a reference to the solemn moment of ingesting, through the doctrine of transubstantiation,

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<sup>101</sup> Tournemire collected in his sketchbook for *L'Orgue Mystique* additional texts from *The Bible* and Dom Guéranger as inspiration for his work.

<sup>102</sup> For a synopsis of the use of *L'Orgue Mystique* in the liturgy of Tournemire's time see Robert Sutherland Lord, 'Liturgy and Gregorian Chant in *L'Orgue Mystique* of Charles Tournemire', *The Organ Yearbook*, no. 15 (1984), 60-97.

<sup>103</sup> In 1931 Dupré wrote his *79 Chorals* Op. 28 as an intermediary technical step to Bach's *Orgelbüchlein*.



the bread or the actual body of Christ, in the mass. Before this moment in the liturgy we are told that we should 'Take and eat all of this: For this is my body ... Take and drink all of it, for this is the chalice of my blood of the New and eternal testament, the mystery of faith which shall be shed for you and for many for the remission of sins. Do this as often as you shall drink this in remembrance of me'.<sup>104</sup> We also ask in prayer: 'We humbly beseech thee, O Almighty God; command these things to be carried by the hands of thy holy Angel to thy altar on high, in the presence of thy divine majesty; that all of us who shall receive the most holy Body and Blood of thy Son, by this participation of the altar, may be filled with all heavenly blessing and grace. Through the same Christ our Lord, Amen.'<sup>105</sup> Thus the reciprocity between Christ and his people in the liturgy of the mass, linked to the salvation of humanity, is implicit in the scriptural epigraph chosen by Messiaen for his piece. Moreover, these liturgical texts exhibit the sort of quasi-macabre ecstatic surrealism that pervades *Le Banquet Céleste*.<sup>106</sup> If the choice of such a text and atmosphere seems deliberately calculated to be spiritually uncomfortable, it is meant to

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<sup>104</sup> *The Missal*, trans. Provost Husenbeth (London: B.F. Baslett, 1903), 24-5. Messiaen would have known the Latin words: 'Accipite et manducate ... Accipite et bibite ...'. I have modernised Husenbeth's translation a little.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 25-6. 'Supplices te rogamus ...'. Thomas Cranmer's adaptation of this part of the ordinary makes the connection between Christ and his people even clearer: 'Grant us therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat the flesh of thy dear Son Jesus Christ, and to drink his blood, that our sinful bodies may be made clean by his body, and our souls washed through his most precious blood, and that we may evermore dwell in him and he in us. Amen.' Thomas Cranmer, 'The Prayer of Humble Access', *The Book of Common Prayer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1662), 275.

<sup>106</sup> Messiaen returned to the subject of the mass in his motet *O Sacrum Convivium!* (1937) which sets the following text: 'O most sacred banquet, wherein Christ is received; the memory of his passion is renewed, the mind is filled with grace, and a semblance of future glory is given to us. Alleluia.'

be, for without this discomfort the process of self-examination, catharsis and eventual redemption cannot begin.

Messiaen's piece is a call to discipleship, to recognise ourselves and join God as sons of the Father. It is therefore less a meditation than a mediation. The richly spiced incense-laden atmosphere of Messiaen's harmonic language ensures that the actual sound of the work realises Péladan's notion of provoking an obsession in order to precipitate self-awareness. In Huysmans's novel *En Route*, his character Durtal is just beginning the process of self-examination.<sup>107</sup> His state of spiritual torpor and trembling before the moment of ingestion of the communion seems writ large in the first chord of the piece with its gently undulating string registration and dissonance.<sup>108</sup> Messiaen's scriptural epigraph is concerned with this sacramental moment of communion between God and man, and, when placed above his opening melody, the *rapprochement* between text and music may be used to reveal concealed meanings, and a sense of narrative in this work:<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Georges Bataille's novella *L'Histoire de l'Œil*, from the same year as *Le Banquet Céleste* (1928), provokes pornographic, blasphemous and sacrilegious obsessions in order to condemn them. They are made all the more shocking through the 'matter of fact' style of narration adopted.

<sup>108</sup> The registration of the *voix céleste*, and *gamba* (tuned slightly apart so that they beat with one another and produce this undulating affect) and a bourdon 8. This is a registration used in many little pieces of Tournemire's *L'Orgue Mystique*.

<sup>109</sup> *TMLM*, 13. Messiaen writes: 'Knowing that music is a language, we shall seek at first to make melody 'speak'. The melody is the point of departure. May it remain sovereign!' Interestingly, the opening of this piece can be detected in Tournemire's *Fantasie Symphonique* for organ Op. 64 (1933/4), ed. Thomas Daniel Schlee, performed on 7 June 1934 by Tournemire at Ste-Clotilde. See p. 5 (the beginning of the chorale section) (Vienna, Universal, 1985). Tournemire's metronome mark (crotchet = 40) is not quite as slow as Messiaen's (quaver = 52).

Ex. 1 *Le Banquet Céleste* b. 1-9

Ce – lui qui mang<sup>e</sup> ma chair et boit mon sang de-meure en

Très lent, extatique (♩ = 52)  
(lointain, mystérieux)

MANUEL

GR { *pp* *legatissimo*

moi et moi en lui Ce – lui qui mang<sup>e</sup> ma chair et boit mon sang

(peu à peu *p*)

de-meure en moi et moi en lui (moi et moi en lui)

*cresc.*

Notably the text of ‘*moi et moi en lui*’ in b. 8 is shaped by a 4<sup>th</sup> that dissolves back onto itself: *moi* and *lui* have the same note (c<sup>1</sup>#), a musical symbol of the redemptive wholeness achieved at the communion.<sup>110</sup> This interval is used to create the first peroration at b. 10 which acts like a moment of crisis for the ‘*compatiente*’:

Ex. 2 *Le Banquet Céleste* b. 10-11

The ensuing descending line seems to provide a moment of release for the ‘compatiente’, but it leads directly into the second verse of the chorale that signifies that he is beyond the point of return to his previous state of sin. A counter-melody to the chorale, on a piquant pedal registration eschewing 8 and 16 foot tone, mostly doubles the notes in the chords below and occasionally forms dissonances with them. Their sound can be compared to drops of blood falling from the cross into the communion chalice. These will eventually provide the source of the ‘compatiente’s’ redemption ...<sup>111</sup>

The climax of the second verse is created by a foreshortening of the first. A sense of movement towards this moment is created by the incremental change from semibreves at the beginning to quavers which takes place through the agent of the *moi/lui* motif.

<sup>110</sup> Register designations used here and throughout this study are according to those found in: Allen Forte and Steven E. Gilbert, *Introduction to Schenkerian Analysis* (New York: Norton, 1982), 250.

<sup>111</sup> Messiaen’s indication is ‘*staccato bref, à la goutte d’eau*’. The registration is the *Positif flûte 4*, *nazard 2<sup>2</sup> 3*, *doublette 2* and *piccolo 1*. This idea of having the pedals sounding above the manuals again originates with Tournemire’s *L’Orgue Mystique*. See for instance the *Offertoire* of no. 25

From verse 2, appoggiatura dissonances between the pedal and manuals combine with a heightened chromaticism and upward registral shift in the manuals to spur the music on to the moment of climax:<sup>112</sup>

**Ex. 3** *Le Banquet Céleste* b. 16-17



This two bars mirror the cathartic moment of ingestion in which the ‘compatiente’ realises there is no way forward other than through the reconciliation and absolution of communion.<sup>113</sup> He becomes momentarily one with Christ and may gain an inkling both of the redemptive magnitude of Christ’s sacrifice and of his own mortality.

In the final section the ‘*moi et moi en lui*’ motif is used again and again as Messiaen allows the music to move back from quavers to longer and longer values and the pedal dissonances gradually dissolve as though an inner calm has been created through the act of communion. The registral progression from  $c\sharp^2$  to  $c\sharp^1$  (b.18-19) is

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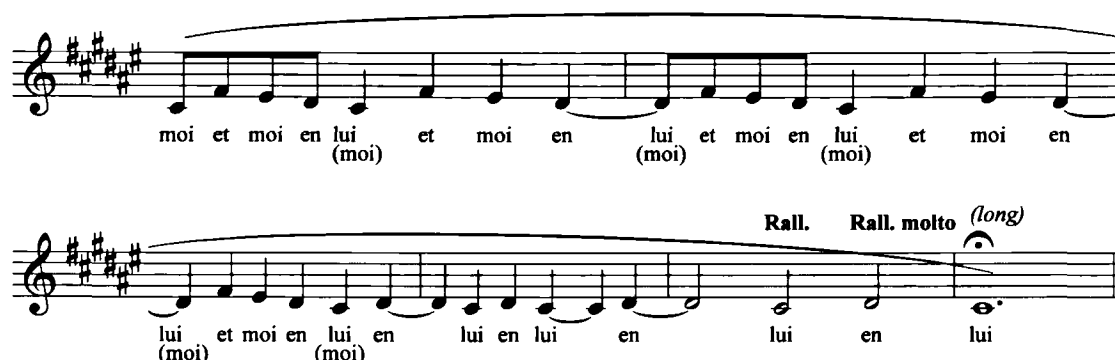
(*Pentecôte*) which uses 4 and  $2^{2/3}$  foot stops in the pedals, or the *Elévation* of no. 17 (*Pâques*), which uses a 4 foot in the pedal, as indeed does the *Elévation* of no. 41 (*XV<sup>e</sup> Dimanche après la Pentecôte*).

<sup>112</sup> On the last beat of b. 17 the 4 foot pitch of the pedals and the 8 foot pitch of the manuals would both sound  $d^2\sharp$ .

<sup>113</sup> I use the word absolution because this is the moment when forgiveness is spiritually enacted.

followed by a compression of the *moi/lui* motif in b. 20-5, an example of what Messiaen calls *développement par élimination*.<sup>114</sup>

**Ex. 4** *Le Banquet Céleste* b. 20-5



One can sense in this final section the ‘spiritual anaesthetic’ that Durtal speaks of: a progressive quasi post-coital calmness and a growing sureness in the knowledge of his redemption, the profundity of which is resonated by the final C<sup>2</sup># *lui*.<sup>115</sup> This seventh chord is an ambiguous symbol of eternity. As it is the *final* of the mode it has no need to resolve and, like the soul of the ‘compatiente’, it remains curiously open.

Throughout the work the use of a slow tempo symbolises the eternal nature of God (see Chapter 3). Thus the final c# *lui* seems to represent this unity with God. The ‘compatiente’ has weathered the spiritual storms of self-realisation and catharsis to be redeemed by/to God in the eternal length of this chord.

Contrary to the critical axiom that *Le Banquet Céleste* is a paragon of staticism, my interpretation reveals that there is a subtle musical and spiritual dynamic flow to the

<sup>114</sup> TMLM, 35. ‘Vincent D’Indy explained this very well in his *Cours de composition musicale*.’

<sup>115</sup> This is the sounding pitch of the final pedal note. The bourdon 32 produces a soft purring resonant effect which is simply magical in a building like La Trinité with its acoustic of over 6 seconds.

piece. With this work, Messiaen brings the art-religion world of Wagner's *Parsifal* back to Catholicism, condensing the redemptive message of this work into seven minutes. That it was meant to be religious is in no doubt. That it was important to Messiaen is likewise in no doubt; he returned to it in 1960, changing the dynamics, doubling the note values to make the piece look slower, and finally changing the registrations and therefore the sound.

Through its rich harmonic language Messiaen conjures up the spirit of modernity in order to transfigure it. It is as though the wound of modernity can only be made whole by the spear that smote it.<sup>116</sup> Messiaen invites us to be made whole through an emotional and spiritual engagement with his music as a religious act, making music into a larger drama to be witnessed by the world. Every hearing or re-enactment is another uncovering of the grail to partake of that within.

The ecstatic and hedonist idealism of *Le Banquet Céleste* is well partnered by the monumentalism of *Apparition de l'Église éternelle* (1932) which follows a similar musical and spiritual trajectory. While this work carries no official dedication, both Tournemire's copy [Fig. 1] and the apocalyptic aesthetic of the piece reveal Messiaen's debt to the older *Maître*. Here is Messiaen's description of the work:

An iamb [a poetic foot of two syllables: short, long] and a double long.

The alternation of some bright colours of the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, and 7<sup>th</sup> 'Modes of Limited Transposition', their opposition with empty fifths, hard and cold. An immense

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<sup>116</sup> Steinberg, Michael P., 'Music Drama and the End of History', *New German Critique* (Fall 1996), 163-80. Steinberg interprets Amfortas's wound, in Wagner's *Parsifal*, as an allegory of modernity, examining the meaning of the claim that the wound has finally been closed.

crescendo gathering together little by little all the forces of the fortissimo of the organ - a diminuendo also quite progressive. That is all the rhythmic, harmonic and dynamic material of this piece. Like the saying of the 'Dédicace des églises': scissors, hammer, some suffering, and some tests, tailoring and polishing the elected persons, living stones of the spiritual edifice (that which the unceasing throbbing in the bass expresses). The vision is very simple, almost brutal at its peak. Established in slowness, it takes a long time to disappear ...<sup>117</sup>

This *Note de L'Auteur* shows clearly that Messiaen has the trajectory of the sufferer, from sinner to saint, in mind. The inscription on the autograph (not published in the printed score) makes it even clearer:

Faite des pierres vivantes,  
Faite des pierres du ciel,  
Elle apparaît dans le ciel:  
C'est l'Épouse de l'Agneau!  
C'est l'Église du ciel  
Faite des pierres du ciel  
Qui sont les âmes des élus.  
Ils sont en Dieu et Dieu en eux  
Pour l'éternité du ciel!<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Liner notes for a 1995 recording of *Apparition de l'Église éternelle, Livre d'Orgue* and *Verset pour la Fête de la Dédicace* by Louis Thiry on Jade CD: 74321 30296-2, 4.

<sup>118</sup> Op. Cit., Schlee and Kämper, 142-3. Made of living stones/ Made of heaven's stones/It appears in the sky/ It is the spouse of the lamb/It is heaven's church/Made of heaven's stones/Which are souls



Messiaen makes the analogy between the precious stones in the New Jerusalem (from the Apocalypse) and the souls of the redeemed. The Church, as the bride of Christ, is made up of the living stones of ‘the elect’ polished by vicarious suffering. ‘They are in God and God is in them’: the *moi* has been absorbed eternally into the *lui*.

The spectre of Tournemire is present in the cathedralesque immensity of Messiaen’s chords in which triadic harmony, irradiated by added notes from modes 2, 3 and 7 ‘resolves’ and mingles with bare fifths and ordinary major and minor chords, multivalently suggesting different harmonic roots, and lending his harmonies an inward radiance symbolic of the many colours radiating from the New Jerusalem.<sup>119</sup> Messiaen’s chords always resolve back to the spiritual certainty of open-fifth chords suggesting that however hard the ‘compatiente’ may try to escape God and seek to luxuriate in the hedonism of modernity, he must return to God.

Hewn from the same Gothic stone as Messiaen’s edifice are the final movements of Tournemire’s *L’Orgue Mystique* Suite no. 44 (*Office de XVII<sup>e</sup> Dimanche après la Pentecôte*) [*Chorale Alleluiatique* no. 2] and no. 7 (*L’Épiphanie*) [*Fantaisie*]. In both works the allegory of distance discussed above plays a major role; the question for the listener/onlooker is how to participate and even become part of ‘the elect’. Tournemire’s pieces and Messiaen’s *Apparition* provide an example of how and where humanity should be. Through the incremental crescendo in *Apparition* the listener is drawn in; caught in the headlights of the rapturous wonder and majesty of the gothic-musical vision. Like Durtal appreciating the changing light in the cathedral from the darkness of a

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of the elect/They are in God and God in them/For ever and ever! A facsimile of the autograph title page is reproduced in the 1993 Lemoine edition of *Apparition*.

transept, Messiaen and Tournemire take us on a journey from the depths of worldly darkness to the blinding light of God.<sup>120</sup> In Messiaen, the listener is taken registrally upwards and out of his spiritual darkness, symbolised in the opening ‘open fifths’ and crushing sonority of the organ, to the glory of the organ tutti (C major), showing him the possibility of light and life, only to return him (somehow changed) to the darkness from whence he came.<sup>121</sup>

Tournemire’s *pièce terminale* of Suite no. 44 has no such moment of triumph. Tournemire paints a mighty sonic fresco - an onslaught of the organ tutti adorning a plainchant melody (*Beata Gens*) which acts as a recurring refrain and plateau from which to view other perspectives on this material (a chorale and canon respectively).<sup>122</sup> But from p. 15 in the score Tournemire engulfs the listener in more and more powerful waves of sound. Uncompromising in its crushing volume and austerity, the work acts as an image of the majesty and terror of God that gives the ‘compatiente’ no choice but to turn away from the horrors of modernity towards his maker. Synthesis and redemption are as much intimated as denied at the end, where chromatic chords over a sustained pedal point

<sup>119</sup> The multivalency of Messiaen’s chords will be further discussed in Chapter 2.

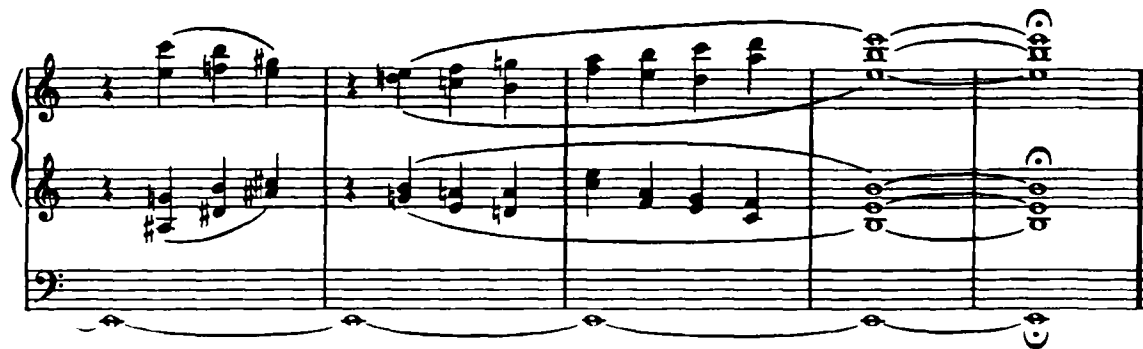
<sup>120</sup> The opening registration calls for Foundations and Reeds on the Swell (box closed) with 8, 16 and 32ft foundation stops on the pedal. The effect of distant thunder is ominous.

<sup>121</sup> The use of C major to depict light has a long history ranging from the *The Creation* by Haydn (1801) to Bartók’s *Duke Bluebeard’s Castle* (1913).

<sup>122</sup> Gradual for the 17<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost: ‘Beate gens, cujus est Dominus Deus eorum: populus, quem elegit Dominus in hereditatem sibi. (Verse: Verbo Domini caeli firmati sunt: et spiritu oris ejus omnis virtus eorum).’ *Liber Usualis* (Tournai: Desclée, 1934), 1048-49. ‘Blessed is the nation whose God is the lord; the people whom He hath chosen for his inheritance. By the word of the Lord the heavens were established, and all the power of them by the spirit of His mouth.’

resolve into the strength of an ‘open-fifth’ chord, suggesting both the pillars inside a Gothic Cathedral and the unknowable (*l’au-delà*):

**Ex. 5** *L’Orgue Mystique* no. 44 (conclusion)



Messiaen’s *Apparition* uses such chords to effect a totalising architectural vision; their austerity and iconoclasm referring back to a pre-subjective mediaevalism while accepting no compromise with the human artifice of tonality or post-Enlightenment modernity.<sup>123</sup> Re-contextualisation of material in this music acts subtly to change meaning; the ‘plainchant’ refrain in the Tournemire and the opening material of Messiaen’s *Apparition* recur with greater vehemence and intensity throughout (up until the climax in the Messiaen work and p. 15 in the Tournemire). Such intense repetition strengthens these composers’ idealist and utopian vision of redemption, and attempts to placate an imaginary secular world crying out for certainty. Imaginatively harmonised and modally

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<sup>123</sup> All recorded performances seem to have problems with this except Messiaen’s, whose recording is magisterial. Two other works, *Cathédrales* from Louis Vierne’s (1870-1937) *Pièces de Fantaisie* (Book IV) [1925-27] and the *Prière* (*Douze Pièces*) [1939] of Gaston Litaize (1909-91) use the same darkness into light metaphor.

adorned, the chorale remains the simple vehicle through which a pagan world is called to redemption.

The way Messiaen harmonises and shapes this chorale texture in *Apparition* is particularly interesting. Much of the elasticity and drama of the work is set up in the opening section which comprises two repeated four-bar ‘sentence’ structures, the second extended to 6 bars. The movement out of the dark rich colours of mode 2/2 in the first bar to an open fifth on C major prefigures the trajectory of whole piece, as does the upward registral movement in the soprano line of  $c^2-d^2-e^2-f^2$  from b. 1-3 (all using ‘open-fifth’ or triadic harmony). At b.4 this movement is foiled by the unexpected arrival of an open fifth on F#, the furthest scale-degree away from C.<sup>124</sup> One might expect the soprano line to go up to  $g^2$  and the harmony to move commensurately to the tonic or dominant. Instead this F# signals the first precarious crevasse on the ‘compatiente’s’ momentous climb towards God and self-realisation. The *faux-dominante* status of F# acts as an interruption that, along with grinding bass iambs, begins the process of polishing the ‘compatiente’ for his redemption:

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<sup>124</sup> *TMLM*, 47. ‘... a very fine ear perceives F#’ in the overtones series.’ It is therefore unsurprising to see him using this chord in this way.

Ex. 6 *Apparition de l'Église éternelle* b. 1-5

The musical score for Ex. 6, measures 1-5, is presented in three staves. The top staff is for the right hand (MANUEL), the middle staff is for the left hand (PEDALE), and the bottom staff is for a lower part. The tempo is marked 'Très lent'. The key signature has one sharp (F#). The MANUEL part starts with a 'R' (ritardando) and 'pp legato'. The PEDALE part is marked 'legato'.

F# substitutes for G (the true upper dominant), but it also substitutes itself for the lower dominant (F) at b. 10. Via a quasi-perfect cadence (F#-B flat) this move to B flat at b. 11 extends the initial phrase's registral, dynamic and harmonic scope and brings the 'compaciente' to the next plateau of his journey. He is to be taken away from the light of C major (b. 1), only to be returned via 'polishing' harmonic trails and trials, to the greater light of this key at the climax.<sup>125</sup> The chromatic complexity of b. 9-10 (mode 7/1) is thickened in b. 12-17 by chords in mode 3. This passage functions as a development of the opening idea of the piece and uses quasi-perfect cadences onto 'open-fifth' chords 'over the bar' from b. 12-13 and 15-16. Dissonance places these fifth chords in greater relief, while the quasi-sequential nature of the phrasing (together with a foreshortening of the second phrase (compare b. 12-13 with b. 14-15) gives the 'compaciente' little sense of comfort, but rather winds the spring that will lead to his climactic release a little tighter.

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<sup>125</sup> 'Polishing' is a reference to Messiaen's unpublished poem for the piece.

A return to the opening material at b. 18 (louder this time) provides little succour for the 'compatiente', but ominously portends the momentous climax. Messiaen compresses the music of b. 1-11 by leaving out the first four bars at b. 18-24. At b. 24 we might expect the repeat of the 'development' idea (b. 12-17) which leads back to the opening material. Instead the 'compatiente' is spurred on to the moment of realisation by an upward transposition of b. 23-4. This transposition from B flat (b. 24) to C (both 'open fifths') at b. 26 brings us full circle to the opening of the work, except this time the C 'open-fifth' chord is lengthened from four to seven quavers. As this counts as b. 1, Messiaen does not have to repeat any material and so progresses onward at b. 27-29 to a repeat of b. 2-4 but up an octave.

There is no turning back now for the 'compatiente'; the build-up of tension through elision, transposition and volume (via the organ's crescendo) is too great. Just as anticipation of the revelation of glory (in the C major climax) is almost upon him, Messiaen stretches the music to its utmost. The original bass movement of C-F-F# (from b. 3-4) is repeated three times (b. 28-29, 30-1 and 32-3). As in *Le Banquet Céleste*, elision of bars propels the music to its cathartic climax. Messiaen has effectively compressed b. 1-4 into a quasi-perfect cadence figure. On the third repeat (b. 32-3), the shock move to A flat minor, out of the sharp-side keys that have dominated thus far, primes the 'compatiente' for his moment of revelation. He is being ineluctably drawn in: slowly but inexorably A flat traverses B flat minor to the immensity of C major (with the thunderous lowest pedal note in octaves) lasting for nineteen quavers now - there can no longer be

any resistance.<sup>126</sup> This quasi-Dorian cadence structure is used by Tournemire in the central section of the *pièce terminale* in Tournemire's Epiphany suite (*L'Orgue Mystique* no. 7), a work that Messiaen certainly heard when it was played by Jean Langlais in a concert on 25 April 1932.<sup>127</sup>

Ex. 7 Tournemire *L'Orgue Mystique* no. 7 p. 15 (system 4)

♩ = 60 *poco più largo*

6

Anches II Anches I

sempre I. II. III.

Boîtes ouvertes

+ Tirasse I

en insistant

Ex. 8 Messiaen *Apparition de l'Église éternelle* b. 30-5

The immensity of this moment suggests the radiant spiritual power of Gothic architecture, the light of God. The 'compatiente' is given a vision of the distance he has travelled from

<sup>126</sup> For example the opening musical paragraph (b. 1-11) is varied at b. 18-29 by the elision of b. 1-4.

Also b. 28-29 are repeated at b. 30-1 merging into a repetition of b. 1-2 at b. 32-33.

<sup>127</sup> Op.Cit., Fauquet, 'Correspondance inédite', 84, footnote 5.

worldly vice to (the possibility of) redemption as one of the stones in the New Jerusalem.<sup>128</sup> But it is only a oneiric image as (new) chords at b. 44 (*en decrescendo* in mode 3/4 and 2/3) imply that the *faiblesse* of mortality can only dream of such heights. Bars 44-45 are essentially the same as b. 11-12, yet the greater chromatic complexity (and elision of b. 1-10) implies that the ‘compatiente’ has not passed through the cathartic fires of C major unchanged. The old life has given way to the possibility of the new. The ‘compatiente’ is now returned through previous musical material, through a decline in volume and register and a return to sharp-side keys, to a humble state similar to that in which he began. The order of this material is reversed from the opening section (b. 1-17), highlighting the fall of the ‘compatiente’ back to his mortal state.<sup>129</sup> Yet even when the first bars of the work are heard in their entirety at b. 52-5, and again compressed at b. 56-57, their epigonal status carry an assurance that a profound change has occurred and a denouement is nigh. As at the climax, the third repetition of C-F-F# (b. 58-9) elides the F# and leads to dark and unexplored waters: ‘open fifths’ on E and F which exhibit a quasi-organum mediaeval topos.<sup>130</sup> The presence at b. 60-1 of ‘open fifths’ on C# and B (the only ‘open fifths’ not heard so far in the piece) is a form of ‘chromatic completion’ that is aurally striking and implies that, despite the asymptotic failure of the ‘compatiente’ to achieve salvation, a form of inner completion has worked its way out in

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<sup>128</sup> This work was the first work performed (by Olivier Latry) at the reopening of the organ at Notre-Dame de Paris in 1993 accompanied by the white spot-lights inside the building. As the volume increased, so too did the light, until at the C major climax the whole of the inside of the cathedral was filled with white light. The decrescendo returned the building to its former penumbrous gloom. Overall, the effect perfectly matched the musical aesthetic of the piece.

<sup>129</sup> B. 46-51 correspond to b. 12-17, and b. 52-55 correspond to b. 1-4. Messiaen would use the idea of reversing the order of ideas again in *Dieu parmi nous* (see Chapter 3).



him.<sup>131</sup> At the conclusion, the portals of eternity remain open in the absence of a traditional tonal conclusion (G - C), exacerbated by the absence of any third in the chords and the presence of the inexorable bass iambs. The ‘compaciente’ is left with only a semblance of his former euphoria, a memory of a vision and of what is to be achieved. Messiaen’s *Apparition* is a triumphal affirmation of the victory of God and the communion of saints, through vicarious suffering, over the grave.<sup>132</sup> It suggests that, even in our mortal state, we may participate in a vision of the beyond and use this to change ourselves - a theme that is taken up in much of Messiaen’s work. The victory to be achieved over the grave is a metaphor for our own human and fallible nature. Such idealism, even though it encapsulates ‘wishful thinking ... deeply rooted in the sincere desire for something which gives “sense” to a culture threatened by emptiness and universal alienation’, also tacitly assumes an asymptotic relationship with any form of synthesis; the desire for redemption is acknowledged to be just that.<sup>133</sup>

Through these two early organ works Messiaen attempts to heal ‘the dissolution of the archaic unity between imagery and concept’ through the establishment of an art that celebrates the presence of God in man.<sup>134</sup> Messiaen (like Tournemire) is a product of

<sup>130</sup> This is the only appearance of an ‘open fifth’ on E in the piece.

<sup>131</sup> This idea of chromatic completion is used again in *Poèmes pour Mi*. For instance in *Paysage* (II) b. 4, mode 3/1 at the start is supplemented by a juxtaposed mode 2/2 in b. 3. The accented off-beat A natural in the next bar then sounds all the more striking because it is the only pitch unheard thus far in the piece. I am grateful to Roger Nichols for pointing this out in his talk ‘Poèmes pour Mi: ou le mariage des Modes’ in his talk on 23/6/02 at the Sheffield 2002 International Messiaen Conference.

<sup>132</sup> The ‘Communion of Saints’ refers back to Huysmans’s *Sainte Lydwine of Schiedam* (1901) discussed in Part II.

<sup>133</sup> Op. Cit., Adorno, 292.

<sup>134</sup> Op. Cit., Adorno, 293.

the Catholic literary revival and symbolist art movements. Through its interiorisation and sublimation of these movements, Messiaen and Tournemire's music forms a critique of their era, by acknowledging that, while reversion to an idealised society is not possible in an age of modernist mass culture and collectivism, the desire for change, renewal and redemption remains imperative to humanity. Both works insist that the eschatological moment to act and change (*kairos*) is upon us; a message in a bottle for the twenty-first century.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Adorno, Theodor W., *Philosophy of Modern Music*, trans. Anne G. Mitchell and Wesley V. Blomster (London: Sheed and Ward, 1973), 133. Adorno concludes his essay on Schoenberg: 'Modern music sees absolute oblivion as its goal. It is the surviving message of despair from the shipwrecked.' Messiaen might easily have written: 'My modern music sees God as its goal. It is the surviving message of Christian hope to the shipwrecked.'

## Chapter 2: Rites of Passage: Modes, Rhythms and 'The Charm of Possibilities'

This chapter begins by investigating the origins of Messiaen's musical language showing how plainchant and the idea of the acciaccatura are implicit in his music as a stylistic and technical signature. These entities are essential to the history and technique of Messiaen's development and the use of his modes of limited transposition in his music. In doing this, aspects of Messiaen's burgeoning musical language will be addressed in three early orchestral works: *Les Offrandes oubliées* (1930), *Le Tombeau resplendissant* (1931) and *Hymne au Saint Sacrement* (1932).<sup>1</sup>

The second part of my chapter explores the ways in which triads and acciaccaturas are seminal to Messiaen's harmonisations of his modes. What emerges from this investigation is a more complex model of Messiaen's early music: in their modernist multivalency the early works challenge and extend Messiaen's own theoretical systemisation of mode in *TMLM*. Indeed, as the third part of this chapter demonstrates, Messiaen's writings tend to limit the interpretative possibilities of his music. Messiaen's 'charm of impossibilities', an umbrella term that relates rhythm and pitch, should be reversed to the 'charm of possibilities', for his idea of mode as a model for his musical thought can be extended to the ideas of form and colour that break the limits of Messiaen's theoretical boundaries.

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<sup>1</sup> It is interesting in this light to note Messiaen's selective use of these works to represent his style in *TMLM*. He does not use *Le Tombeau resplendissant* and has only one example from *Hymne au Saint Sacrement* [no. 367].

## I The Origins of Mode: Plainchant and the ‘Acciaccatura principle’

The importance of plainchant and mode in Messiaen’s music has been examined in *Le Banquet Céleste*. But where did he get the idea of using mode? In a general sense the answer is that the use of mode was *en l’air*. By the time Tournemire and Messiaen were composing their major works, the investigation into modality had been a part of the French obsession with the exotic and the decadent for almost half a century.<sup>2</sup> Messiaen’s exposure to mode began at the Paris Conservatoire:

Being still a young composer at the Conservatoire, and much enthused by a course in which Maurice Emmanuel had developed lovingly his theories on antique modes, he pointed me towards a festival of his works. There they performed his ‘*Trente Chansons*’. I was amazed and I was converted to modal music instantly. It is fifteen years since that time. My enthusiasm has not diminished: further proof of their eternal freshness.<sup>3</sup>

If this was written in 1947, then Messiaen was talking about 1932 as the year of his ‘conversion’. What seems odd is that he was already composing modal music. Years later, Messiaen’s memory seems to have improved:

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<sup>2</sup> In 1878 Bourgault-Decoudray had organised a conference at the Universal Exposition on *Modalité dans la Musique Grecque*, and Gevaert had published his *Histoire de la mélopée antique*. Charles Kœchlin, ‘Maurice Emmanuel et la musique modale’, *La Revue Musicale*, Special edition on Maurice Emmanuel (1947), 62.

<sup>3</sup> Messiaen, Olivier, ‘Maurice Emmanuel: Ses ‘trente chansons bourguignonnes’, *La Revue Musicale*, Special edition on Maurice Emmanuel (1947), 108. It would be easy to overemphasise the influence of these simple but subtle arrangements of chansons. They seemed to have confirmed a direction Messiaen had already taken in his own music.

I took Maurice Emmanuel's course in the history of music at the Paris Conservatoire in the years 1928-29. The course initiated me into Greek metre, plainchant modes, exotic modes, and modal music in general. His ideas on modes and rhythms have profoundly marked me, and oriented my thought towards new ways. He had more influence on my musical thought at that moment than Marcel Dupré (my organ teacher) and Paul Dukas (my composition teacher), who spoke often to me of the same things. Then I got to know Maurice Emmanuel's music, notably the *Sonatine sur les modes hindous* (for piano) [*Sonatina no.4*], and I had the opportunity to assist at the première of his grand opera *Salamine* (after *The Persians* of Aeschylus). Finally I heard, in the same époque ... the '*trente chansons Bourguignonnes du Pays de Beaune*' harmonised by Maurice Emmanuel. I have never forgotten these chansons, and the modal accompaniment which Maurice Emmanuel gave to them ... It is an extraordinary masterpiece [*chef d'oeuvre*] of invention and variety! [...] Those who shall read *l'Histoire de la Langue Musicale*, and wish, like Maurice Emmanuel, to evade the tyranny of the barline and of C major, need only to read or listen to the '*Chanson bourguignonnes*'. There they will find the explanation of this choice of this true music and the earth's perfume, renewed by plainchant and ancient Greece, well forgotten now since modern morals have destroyed folklore and the winegrowers' costumes of yesteryear [*des vignerons de jadis*], but which really existed and were one of the charms of our old France.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Messiaen, Olivier, 'Olivier Messiaen parle de Maurice Emmanuel' (November 1980), in Maurice Emmanuel's *l'Histoire de la Langue Musicale*, Vol. I (Paris, Laurens, 1981), first published in

This last aspect is echoed in an article by Emmanuel in 1928:

Polymodality is an abundant modal repertoire, unlimited, which the musician may draw upon according to his convenience and fantasies, bearing in mind that he doesn't believe in the narrow limitations and shortcomings of the pure major and its bastard minor, which alone occupy our theories [*solfèges*].<sup>5</sup>

Like Emmanuel and many other composers, Messiaen was seeking new ways of escaping the tyranny of major-minor tonality. It is also clear that he sees modalism, with its mediaeval associations, as an antidote to the post-Enlightenment malaise that Hello, Tournemire and Messiaen have all written about. Mode is to become the spear which will close the wound of modernity.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps Emmanuel's music was indeed a catalyst for his thinking, but what is striking in Messiaen's statements (and elsewhere in *TMLM*) is the absence or marginalisation of Debussy, Ravel, Stravinsky, and particularly Tournemire whose modal music was familiar from Messiaen's excursions into the organ loft at Ste-Clotilde and is writ large in the ecstasism of *Le Banquet Céleste* and *Apparition de L'Église éternelle*. In asserting his loyalty to Emmanuel, Messiaen is perhaps subverting some of his closest influences. It is perhaps a sign of human nature, and especially composers' natures, that individuals wishing to assert their originality should be loath to talk about their closest influences or at least only mention those that they deem flattering to their image. This is perhaps why Messiaen was so keen to

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1911. *Salamine* (1921-24) was given at the Paris Opera on 19 June 1929.

<sup>5</sup> Emmanuel, Maurice, 'La Polymodalité', *La Revue Musicale*, no. 3 (1928), 197.

<sup>6</sup> Op. Cit., Steinberg, 'Music Drama and the End of History'.

espouse in his writings (the radical) Stravinsky of the early ballets rather than the retiring Tournemire as an influence.<sup>7</sup>

Despite Messiaen's assertions about who influenced him more, we have mode as a constant. Behind what Messiaen is doing with mode are two fundamental ideas: plainchant and the acciaccatura principle. The aesthetic topos of plainchant has already been discussed in Chapter 1. The following section presents an investigation into Messiaen's appropriation of plainchant in his early music via the music of Debussy and Ravel.

## Plainchant

Messiaen's interest in plainchant must have been stimulated by his weekly sojourns to Tournemire's organ loft (and subsequently his involvement with *L'Orgue Mystique*). All French organists were taught to improvise on plainchant (used in the Roman Catholic liturgy) and Messiaen (in Dupré's organ class) was no exception. Tournemire's (and hence Messiaen's) interest in plainchant was stimulated by visits to Solesmes, where in the nineteenth century, the monks notationally formalised this music into a metrical structure comprising a continual change of two and three-note patterns which imparts to it its 'immaterial and fluid' quality.<sup>8</sup>

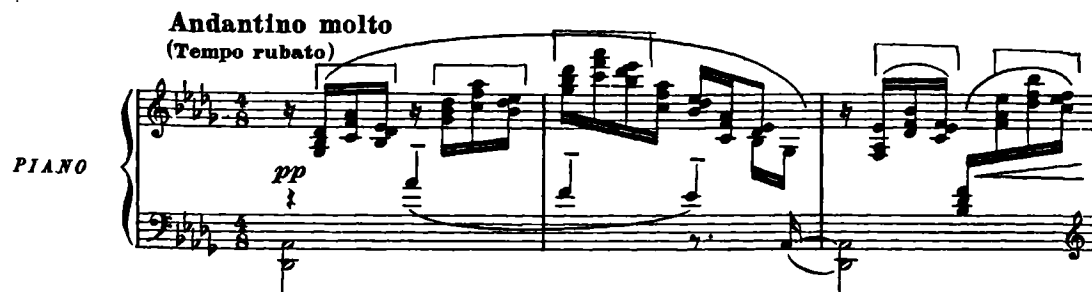
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<sup>7</sup> See Messiaen's article, 'le rythme chez Igor Strawinsky', *La Revue Musicale*, No.191 (1939), 331-2. It is not really until later in his career that Messiaen begins to appropriate Stravinsky fully as an influence. Indeed, it might have only been when he came to analyse *Le Sacre* for his students, in private courses and harmony classes (1941-6) and for his first conservatoire class (1947-8), that he may have realised the full impact of this piece on his music. See Jean Boivan, *La Classe de Messiaen* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1995), 434-5. I say that Tournemire was retiring here because when asked if they knew many people of the age, Mme Alice Tournemire stated that they didn't really have a social life. Madeau Stewart, 'Interview with Mme Alice Tournemire', 22 October 1970 for the BBC, first broadcast on 4 November 1970.

<sup>8</sup> Op. Cit, Huysmans, 35-6.

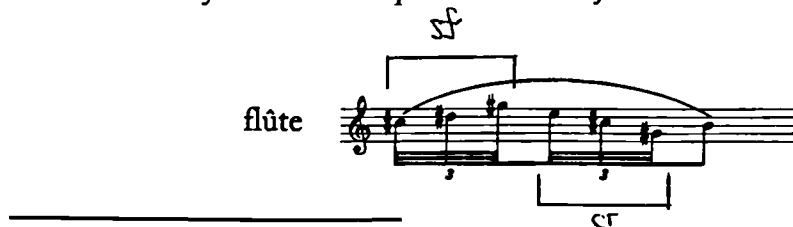
It is well known that Debussy had visited Solesmes and loved plainchant, but this fact is still an area rarely touched upon in Debussy studies. In the opening of Debussy's *Reflets dans l'eau*, Messiaen shows how Debussy uses the three-note melodic *torculus*.<sup>9</sup> Yet he does not go on to show how Debussy subtly mixes note groups of twos and threes in the *tempo rubato* (marked on the example) and how the slightly static quality of D flat major, prolonged through subdominant inflexions (in the r.h.) and a weak cadence at the end of b. 2, abjures from diatonicism, to give this passage its limpid beauty:

**Ex. 9** Debussy *Reflets dans l'eau* b. 1-3



For Messiaen, plainchant is present in the *scandalis flexis* (**sf**) at b. 86 of *Jardins sous la pluie* (*Estampes*), or at b. 2 of *Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir* (*Préludes*, Book 1, no. 4) as well as symbolising the faune in *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* where Messiaen shows that it is imbricated with the *climacus resupinus* (**cr**):<sup>10</sup>

**Ex. 10** Debussy *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* 2 bars after fig. 2

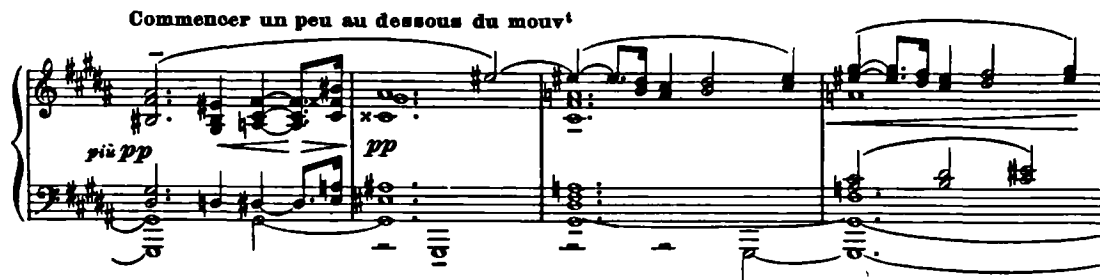


<sup>9</sup> TRCO, Vol. VI, 17.



One can sense these shapes in the following similar examples from b. 31-2 of *Hommage à Rameau* (Images Book 1, no. 2) derived (by inversion) from the *torculus* at the opening of the movement:

**Ex. 11** Debussy *Hommage à Rameau* b. 31-2



and b. 12-14 of Ravel's *Le Gibet* (*Gaspard de la Nuit*), where the motif is immediately varied by a subtle triplet, all counterpointed by the carcass of the hanged man ominously staring out from the Gibet's repeated B flats:

**Ex. 12** Ravel *Le Gibet* b. 12-14



This last example is particularly revealing, for in microcosm it shows that the plagal form of the e flat melodic minor scale (beginning on B flat) seems to suspend the E flat minor tonality of the music (like the man hung from the Gibet) in the same way that

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<sup>10</sup> TRCO, Vol. VI. *Jardins sous la pluie* (p. 134), *Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir* (p. 140) and *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* (p. 30).

the plagal form of F# major (c#-c#) engenders a sense of ‘suspended’ tonality in *Le Banquet Céleste*. A sense (if not the letter) of plainchant’s plagal modes is then present in the music of Ravel and Messiaen.<sup>11</sup>

Indeed, Messiaen’s study of plainchant, particularly in the theoretical works of Dom Mocquereau, leads him to see others’ music with ‘plainchant-tinted’ glasses. His employment of Mocquereau’s analytical apparatus (anacrusis [*anacrouse*], accent [*accent*] and decay [*désinence*]) in dissecting Debussy is effective in dealing with the plainchantesque flow of twos and threes, and is true both to the music’s aesthetic and expressive dimensions. Here is Messiaen’s analysis of the first theme of *La Mer* (1903-5):<sup>12</sup>

Ex. 13 Debussy *La Mer* fig. 1



In his three early works, rhythmic and harmonic subtlety, employing divided strings in certain slow passages, dramatically reveal how the sentimental affectation

<sup>11</sup> See Marcel Dupré’s *Manuel d’Accompagnement du Plain Chant Grégorien* (Paris: Leduc, 1937).

<sup>12</sup> *TRCO*, Vol. VI, 6. In *TMLM*, Messiaen writes of the upbeat-accent-termination idea that it is related to the idea of the appoggiatura: ‘Let us preserve what is most essential in the appoggiatura: the expressive accent. Let us prepare this accent by an immense upbeat and resolve it by an immense termination; its expressive power will be augmented in the same proportion. (...) Finally - and here is the principle - our combination [i.e. upbeat, accent, termination] turns around the expressive accent, which is its centre and reason for being, whereas the embellishment group does not have an accent.’ p. 56. Messiaen states that upbeats and terminations are found in Mozart, Schoenberg and Berg (who ‘used them with a rare emotional intensity’), but that it is ‘Arthur Honegger especially who has carried them to their maximum effect (see notably *Judith*, *Horace victorieux*, *Antigone*, *Danse des morts*).’ For an example of an embellishment group see the end of *La Vierge et L’Enfant* (*La Nativité*).

can substitute for the sublime in Messiaen's music.<sup>13</sup> At fig. 23 of *Le Tombeau resplendissant* we find an early approximation at incorporating the 'twos and threes' rhythms of plainchant into his music. Yet the rhythmic fluidity that should derive from this is mostly nullified by the continual return to a<sup>2</sup> in the violins and the fact that the harmony is the same at the beginning of each bar. As in ex. 13, which uses the idea of the abridged repetition [*répétition abrégée*], Dom Mocquereau's terminology can be applied elsewhere:

Ex. 14 *Le Tombeau resplendissant* fig. 23

Ex. 15 *Le Tombeau resplendissant* fig. 24

The repetition of material lacks the melodic and harmonic subtlety of the flute melody that follows it (ex. 15), or the way the melodic cell that opens Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du*

<sup>13</sup> The sound of divided strings is present in all three early works and is a trait that Messiaen used throughout his life from *L'Ascension* to the *Epôde* of *Chronochromie* (1959-60) to *Eclairs sur l'Au-Delà ...* (1987-92).

*Printemps* changes and yet retains its identity. But neither ex. 14 or 15 have the *souplesse* of the flute melody at fig. 40 of *Pelléas et Mélisande* with its lilting plainchantesque combination of compound time, duplets, ties and rests and sense of movement underneath.<sup>14</sup>

Ex. 16 Debussy *Pelléas et Mélisande* Act I/Scene III fig. 40

**40** Sans lenteur  
1<sup>o</sup> Solo

Fl. *p expressif* *piu p*

Ge. Est-ce toi? Nous aus .

PÉLLÉAS Oui! Je ve \_ nais du cô \_ te de la mer...

**40** Sans lenteur

Vols *pp*

div. *p*

Alt. *p*

Vielle *pizz.* *p*

C.B. *pizz.* *p*

All three examples above entail subtle repetition and change and carry the aesthetic dimension of plainchant's timelessness in their avoidance of a clear metre and strong

<sup>14</sup> TRCO, Vol. VI, 84.

downbeat.<sup>15</sup> If the ebb and flow of Messiaen's melody (ex. 15) seems perfectly balanced, compare it to the melody in the final section of *Les Offrandes oubliées* (in mode 2/2) where, even in the first bar, the change of chord allows the tied r.h. e<sup>2</sup> to change context so that when the music returns to the initial chord in b. 2, there is a sense of progression, of tension and release (moving through the *torculus* of b. 1) that is lacking in ex. 15. Bars 2 and 3 of ex. 17 entail an extension and continuation of the melodic space and harmonic tension opened up in b. 1, before the return to the opening in b. 4. The result is a music that, like that of *Le Tombeau*, retains its sense of quiet ecstasy but that, like *Le Banquet Céleste*, contains more internal movement and drama:<sup>16</sup>

**Ex. 17** *Les Offrandes oubliées* b.111-14



Messiaen himself indicates that this melody contains the melodic torculus (at X) found in Debussy's *Reflets dans l'eau* (ex. 9).<sup>17</sup> The sensuality of plainchant is mixed with

<sup>15</sup> The aspect of time and timelessness will be explored further in Chapter 3.

<sup>16</sup> Indeed, Messiaen must have been proud of this section as he gives a full analysis of this 'Ternary Sentence' in *TMLM*. The ethereal effect of this passage is imparted by the luscious strings, the predominant use of mode 2 and the use of 6/4 chords for their topos of eternity. It is little wonder that Tournemire recognised that 'La fin de ces pages émues est très saisissante'. Tournemire would also, presumably, have recognised the audacious 'sincerity' of Messiaen's accompanying poem and, considering *L'Orgue Mystique's* devotion to plainchant and sacred texts, have empathised with such a literary inspiration.

<sup>17</sup> See *TMLM*, Vol. II, 14, ex. 87. Messiaen also shows that this figure is found in b. 2 (piano part) of *L'Épouse* (ex. 86) and b. 2 of *Paysage (Poèmes pour Mi)* [ex. 88], b.1-2 of the *Extrêmement*

the eroticism of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* Act II/scene I b. 84-110 in the mode 3

*Presque lent* sections of Messiaen's *Hymne au Saint Sacrement*:<sup>18</sup>

Ex. 18 Messiaen *Hymne au Saint Sacrement* fig. 3

Presque lent (♩=80)

Tutti Vn. I (avec sord.)

6 Vn. II Soli (sans sord.)

Viola Solo (sans sord.)

3 Ve. Soli (avec sord.)

Vcl. Solo (sans sord.)

\* Expressif et poétique.  
... Trémolo très rapide.

The five-note motif (marked Y in ex. 18) is not only found in plainchant as the

*Porrectus Flexus* (exemplified by the bell motive in Wagner's *Parsifal*):<sup>19</sup>

*lent, tendre, serein* section of *Combat de la Mort et de la Vie* (*Les Corps Glorieux*) [ex. 89] and  
b. 15-18 of *Arc-en-ciel d'innocence* (*Chants de Terre et de Ciel*) [ex. 90]

<sup>18</sup> My comparison is based as much on the use of the triplet figures as on the impressionistic-sounding orchestration.

<sup>19</sup> *TRCO*, Vol. IV, 10. See also p. 35-8 for a fascinating list of different plainchant figurations and their appearance throughout western music.

Ex.19 *Porrectus Flexus* and *Parsifal* Act I/scene II (opening)

Porrectus flexus : 



but in the five-note Russian melodic formula that Messiaen tells us derives from a 'chante nuptial populaire de Nijni Novgorod' and the opening of Musorgsky's *Boris Godunov*:<sup>20</sup>

Ex. 20: *Popular wedding song from Nijni Novgorod* (end) Musorgsky *Boris Godunov* (opening)



fin d'un « chant nuptial » populaire de Nijni Novgorod

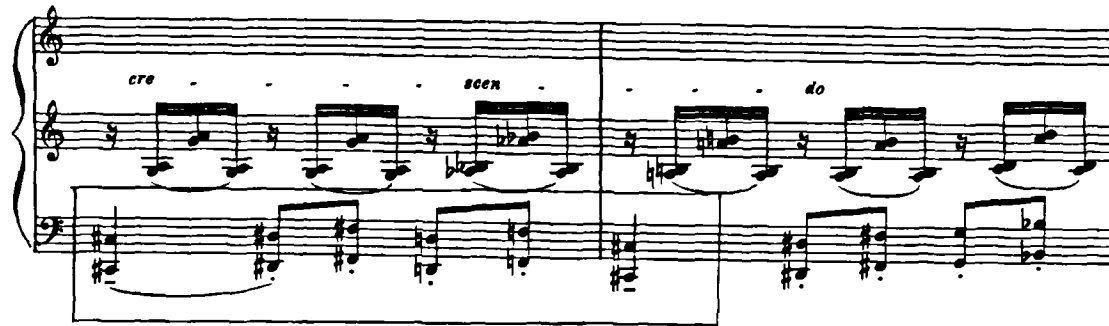


début de Boris Godounow (Moussorgsky)

This motive can also be found throughout Debussy, such as in *Poissons d'or*:<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> *TRCO*, Vol. VI, 145. In *TRCO*, Vol. VII (p. 84), Messiaen reveals the melodic *interversions* present in this melody.

<sup>21</sup> *TRCO*, Vol. VI, 124. Messiaen analyses the harmony of b. 68-71.

**Ex. 21: Debussy *Poisson d'or* b. 68-9**

These examples reveal that Messiaen saw others' music through plainchant and heard the melodic and rhythmic subtlety of plainchant in his inner composer's ear.

### **The Grace-note (Acciacatura/Appoggiatura) Principle**

The second important element in the origins of Messiaen's modal thinking is the inculcation of grace-notes into his harmonies. In a programme note to his wife's recording of Albéniz's *Iberia* he writes:

What is the 'acciaccatura'? The 'acciaccatura' is a foreign note sounded [*frappé*] at the same time as the real note that it affects. Several simultaneous acciaccaturas and 'real' notes are possible. Domenico Scarlatti, following the teaching of his master Francesco Gasparini, made frequent use of this artifice! The acciaccatura abounds and rebounds [*surabondes*] in the music of Albéniz. It is this which gives *Iberia* its modern aspect, and so enlivens the old major tonality, that we forget the banalities of tonic-dominant harmonies, overwhelmed as they are with groups of false notes! To cite some examples: the exquisite balance of 6 divided by 2 and 3, or the appoggiaturas and the acciaccaturas that give a delicate gilding [*orfèvrerie*] at the start and end of



*Almería* - the acciaccatura mordents of *Eritaña* - and the truculent and debridled fantasy of *Lavapiés*; triumph of the sun, of violent colours, and the acciaccatura!<sup>22</sup>

Here is an example of what Messiaen is talking about. A simple F minor chord is coloured by notes which have ‘a certain citizenship in the chord, either because they have the same sonority as some classified appoggiatura, or because they issue from the resonance of the fundamental. They are *added notes*.’<sup>23</sup>

Ex. 22 Albéniz *Lavapiés* b. 36-43

<sup>22</sup> Messiaen, Olivier, Liner notes to Yvonne Loriod's recording of Isaac Albéniz's *Iberia*, Vega C 30 A 127 (Disc 1)/128 (Disc 2), 1958. This resonates well with Alexander Goehr's comments that '... the acciaccatura technique had a colossal effect on Messiaen's harmony'. Op. Cit., *Finding the Key*, 'Manchester Years', 40, footnote 7. One can hear in this statement a faint echo of Emmanuel's rejection of ordinary major and minor modes.

<sup>23</sup> TMLM, 47.

What Messiaen is interested in is the way in which grace notes change the effect of the harmony. Indeed acciaccaturas not only colour a line but, because of Albéniz' pedalling in this example, actually become part of the harmony. This sort of use of the appoggiatura can be found in Emmanuel's music which, in this example, sounds closer to Messiaen because of the Hindu mode (*Lalitâ*) used on the second staff from b. 5-7.<sup>24</sup>

**Ex. 23 Emmanuel *Salamine* Act II, fig. 73**

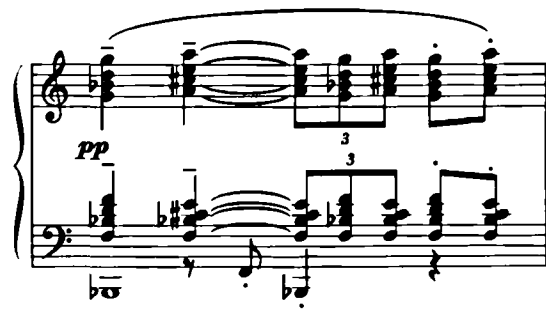


This example reveals the importance of Emmanuel's music in Messiaen's formation. The mode creates acciaccaturas that suspend functional harmony as much as prolonging the second inversion of a B flat dominant seventh chord.<sup>25</sup> This idea of prolonging a sonority is fundamental to the acciaccatura principle as Messiaen hears it. Messiaen cites the following example from Act I of *Pelléas et Mélisande*:

<sup>24</sup> Messiaen cites this mode in *TRCO*, Vol. I, 254. Messiaen 'assisted' at the première of *Salamine*. Op. Cit., Emmanuel, 'Olivier Messiaen parle de Maurice Emmanuel', *l'Histoire de la Langue Musicale*.

<sup>25</sup> This idea has a resonance with Messiaen's treatment of the 'chord of the dominant' which contains all the notes of the major scale. Messiaen arranges 'the different inversions of the chord with such appoggiaturas over a common bass note' (ex. 209) in *TMLM*, Vol. II, 37. See *TMLM*, Vol. I, 50 for the corresponding text.

**Ex. 24:** Debussy *Pelléas et Mélisande* Golaud's theme, Act I, 3 after fig.1



Messiaen then states that he hears this passage in two ways: 1) a B flat major chord with an added sixth with a triple embroidery [*triple broderie*], and 2) one can isolate the second sonority to hear polytonally A major on B flat minor:<sup>26</sup>

**Ex. 25** Messiaen's extrapolation of the second chord of ex. 24



What remains unsaid is that Messiaen hears this second chord as an appoggiatura dissonance to the first while at the same time accepting this sonority in its parsimony. This is the essence of the acciaccatura technique. In the Stravinsky-authorized *Poetics of Music* the writer states:

Let us light our lantern in textbook language: dissonance is an element of transition, a complex of interval of tones which is not complete in itself and which must be resolved to the ear's satisfaction into a perfect consonance. But just as the eye completes the lines of a drawing which the painter has

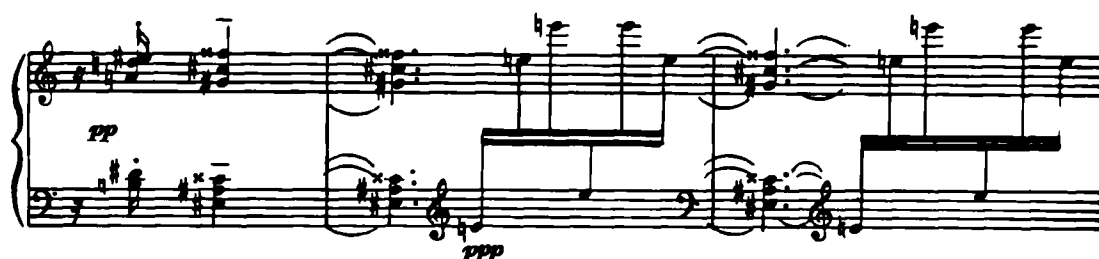
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<sup>26</sup> TRCO, Vol. VI, 58. He also states that Ravel reverses these sonorities in the *Danse générale* (*Bacchanale*) of *Daphnis et Chloé* i.e. B flat minor on top of A and E.

knowingly left incomplete, just so the ear may be called upon to complete a chord and co-operate in its resolution.<sup>27</sup>

Such a premise haunts much of the piano music of *Ravel* and indeed *Le Sacre*. The filigree passages at the end of *Jeux d'eau* [1901], *Noctuelles* and *Oiseaux Tristes* (*Miroirs*) [1904-5], *Ondine* (*Gaspard de la nuit*) [1908] and the infamous passage in 2<sup>nds</sup> in *Scarbo* (b. 448-76) all provide fascinating instances of places where tonality is obfuscated if not suspended by acciaccaturas.<sup>28</sup> In his brief exposé of *Gaspard*, Messiaen himself singles out this moment from *Scarbo* for attention:

Ex. 26 Ravel *Scarbo* b.121-3

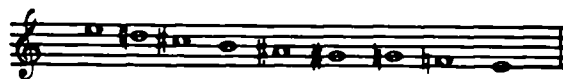


He hears the second chord as belonging to mode 2/2:

<sup>27</sup> Stravinsky, Igor, *Poetics of Music* (bilingual edition) trans. Arthur Knodel and Ingolf Dahl (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970), 45 and 47. Much analytical ink has been spilled on whether this is the case with dissonant chords and whether they should just be thought of as dissonances. See for example Arnold Whittall's 'Music Analysis as Human Science? *Le Sacre du Printemps*', *Music Analysis*, Vol.1 (1982), 33-53.

<sup>28</sup> Also notable are the harsh octatonic acciaccatura dissonances at the beginning of *Alborada del Gracioso* (*Miroirs*), the brittle dissonances (obscuring G major) that open *Adélaïde* (*Valse nobles et Sentimentales*) [1911] and the extraordinary b. 1-3 of *Noctuelles* in which acciaccaturas, like

### Ex. 27 Mode 2/2



but at the same time '*plus loin*', (i.e. as an acciaccatura resolution) in mode 2/1.<sup>29</sup>

**Ex. 28** Messiaen/Ravel chord in mode 2/1



Although an octatonic chord, Messiaen seems to hear it with an F# root. But the root could easily be A#, D# or C#. Thus we can glimpse the origin of Messiaen's multivalent modal harmonies that may imply several different roots, creating a new form of non-traditional tonality. One of the most extraordinary passages in Ravel is the opening of *Surgi de la Croupe et du bond* (*Trois Poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé* no.3) which mixes notes from Messiaen's modes 2 and 3, along with pentatonic resonances:

the moths in the work's title, cloud the l.h. seventh chords and create a dissonant prolongation of a perfect cadence in D flat major.

<sup>29</sup> *TRCO*, Vol. I, 130. Messiaen is also interested in the way we hear this chord as being very long (29 ½ quavers), followed by very short values and rests.

Ex. 29 Ravel *Surgi de la Croupe et du bond* (opening)

The musical score for Ravel's *Surgi de la Croupe et du bond* (opening) is shown. It features a voice part (CHANT) and a piano part (PIANO). The tempo is marked 'Lent' with a metronome marking of 100. The key signature has two flats. The voice part begins with a long note, marked 'en dehors'. The piano part features complex, dissonant chords in the upper register, marked 'p' and 'pp'. A line connects the piano's upper register to the text 'The dissonances (in b. 2-4) without strong roots and high up in the piano's tessitura, begin to 'sound like Messiaen'.'

The dissonances (in b. 2-4) without strong roots and high up in the piano's tessitura, begin to 'sound like Messiaen'. This is because it is, if not a useful metaphor, then a demonstrable characteristic of Messiaen's harmony in the case of mode 3, that he takes harmonics from further up the spectrum and places them amongst lower notes which allows the irradiating of triadic harmony.<sup>30</sup> This gives his harmonies an inner brilliance. Another reason why it sounds different is the fact, as we shall see in the third section, that Messiaen's modes are individuated by particular harmonies and progressions.

The examples from *Gaspard* (ex. 26-8) are particularly revealing of Messiaen's own hearing, as is his discussion of chords from the *Danse Sacrale* of *Le Sacre*. In this work triadic harmonies are often superimposed with other triads which through instrumentation and texture can create new sonorities (as at fig. 13). The main aspects of Stravinsky's harmony are that he varies the dynamic spectrum from a conflict to a symbiosis between consonance and dissonance. This varying dynamic at once creates the affect of harmonic variety and accounts (along with rhythmic techniques of

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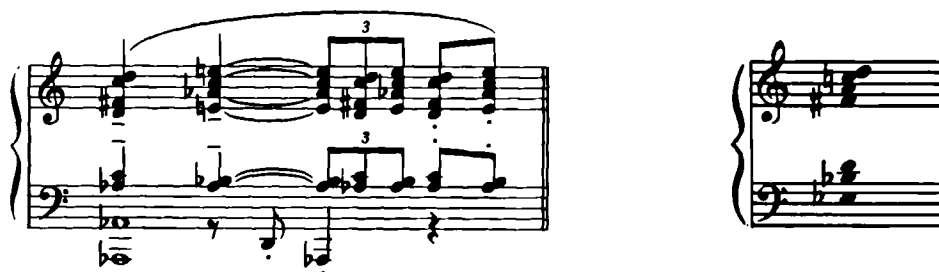
<sup>30</sup> See the section on the 'chord of resonance' in Part III below.

superimposition and ostinato) for the aestheticised brutality and savagery that made *Le Sacre* such a radical event.

One only has to examine Messiaen's analysis of *Le Sacre* to feel his kinship with this work as a point of orientation for his own musical language. For instance, he describes the opening of the second half of *Le Sacre* (using his own musical terminology) as being a chord of D minor, superimposed on a dorian mode (with an e natural) moving to mode 2/2 and then back, or the way his love of Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* encroaches on his description of the chords that open the *Danse Sacrale*.

The first chord, he states, is the well-known theme of Golaud from *Pelléas*:<sup>31</sup>

Ex. 30 Debussy *Pelléas et Mélisande* b. 5 and Stravinsky's opening chord of the *Danse sacrale* fig. 142 of *Le Sacre du Printemps*

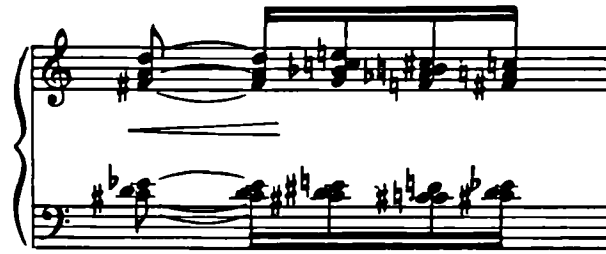


while these chords 'accumulate a packet of sounds around a dominant 7<sup>th</sup> (with sharpened 7<sup>th</sup>) above the bass note D (underpinned but not heard) [*sous entendue*]:<sup>32</sup>

<sup>31</sup> It is clear from this example that Messiaen is stretching the truth to make a historical connection.

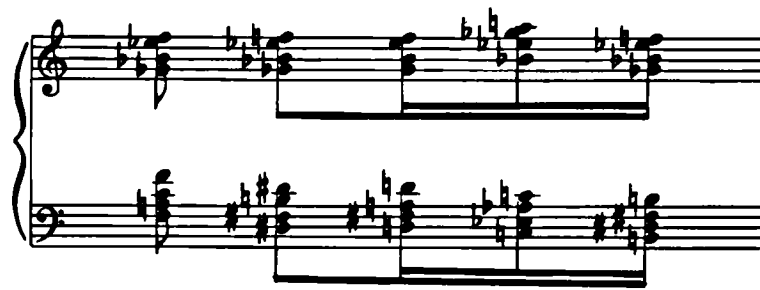
<sup>32</sup> This is an example of Messiaen using the Rameauian idea of sub-posed roots.

**Ex. 31** Stravinsky *Danse sacrale* b. 4-5 after fig. 142



The final set of chords Messiaen describes as ‘polytonal and polymodal. Top staff: E flat minor with an a natural. Bottom staff: mode 2/3 (beginning on B)’:<sup>33</sup>

**Ex. 32** Stravinsky *Danse Sacrale* fig. 144



he then states that the refrain follows a harmonic schema:

**Ex. 33** Messiaen’s harmonic reduction of the refrain of Stravinsky’s *Danse sacrale*



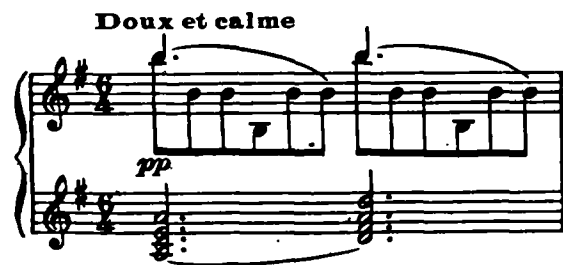
<sup>33</sup> TRCO, Vol. II, 126.



Note again the way Messiaen has shown in brackets how, like Stravinsky, he hears the dissonances as grace notes that resolve to common chords. One can see in these chords the origin of Messiaen's own approach to harmony where triads are free to infer stability (chordal roots) even as (acciaccatura) added notes defer that sense through their dissonance.

Acciaccaturas are for Messiaen a way of creating textures. Messiaen particularly hears the acciaccatura technique in Act III/scene I,<sup>34</sup> and takes the following idea consisting of two chords (one with an added 2<sup>nd</sup> and the other an added 6<sup>th</sup>).<sup>35</sup>

**Ex. 34** Debussy *Pelléas et Mélisande* Act III/Scene I, b. 13



and expands them first with 'added notes' or appoggiaturas (on the unaccented quavers):

**Ex. 35** Messiaen *TMLM*, Vol. II, ex. 190



<sup>34</sup> *TRCO*, Vol. VI, 81-3.

<sup>35</sup> *TMLM*, Vol. II, 33-4.

then he verticalises these appoggiaturas into his harmony:

Ex. 36 Messiaen *TMLM*, Vol. II, ex. 191



and finally uses them in his song *La maison* (*Poèmes pour Mi*):

Ex. 37 Messiaen *La Maison* b. 2-4

A musical score for voice and piano. The tempo is 'Presque vif' and the dynamic is 'mf'. The vocal line is in French: 'Cet - te mai - son nous al - lons la quit - ter:'. The piano accompaniment is in the left hand, with a dynamic of 'p'. The second system shows the vocal line continuing: 'Je la vois dans ton oeil.' The piano accompaniment is marked 'mf expressif'. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings.

It can be seen in the second line of this song, how appoggiatura dissonances in the l.h. effectively prolong an E<sup>7</sup> chord or the 'chord on the dominant'.

Messiaen also elaborates the idea of the acciaccatura into what he calls a *litanie harmonique*: 'that is to say the same notes reprised with different harmonies'.<sup>36</sup> Here is

<sup>36</sup> *TRCO*, Vol. VI, 89. This idea also features at b. 46-7 of Debussy's *Hommage à Rameau* (*Images* Book 1 no.2). In *TMLM*, p. 53, Messiaen cites examples of harmonic litanies in *Un reflet dans le vent* (*Préludes*) and *Lounge à l'Immortalité de Jésus* and *Fouillis d'arcs-en-ciel, pour l'Ange qui annonce la fin du Temps* (*Quatuor pour la fin du Temps*).

his analysis of the following example from Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* (Golaud's theme):

**Ex. 38** Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* Act 1/scene III, 1 bar before fig. 45



Here is the harmonic litany (**Ex. 39**):



In this example Messiaen states that b. 1 is written in a Hindu mode combining modes of G and F, while b. 2 is a dominant ninth chord with an added sixth. Messiaen then makes ex. 39 into a progression:

**Ex. 40** harmonic litany (progression)



He then states: 'I love this litany and I have made it into a progression in *Action de grâces* and *Bail avec Mi (pour ma femme)* [*Chants du Terre et de Ciel* no.1].<sup>37</sup>

<sup>37</sup> TRCO, Vol. VI, 110.

Ex. 41 *Action de grâces* b. 40-5

The musical score for Ex. 41, *Action de grâces* b. 40-5, is presented in two systems. The first system shows the vocal line and the piano accompaniment. The tempo markings are *Presque lent*, *Pressez*, and *Modéré*. The piano part includes dynamic markings like *pp*, *p*, *f*, and *dim.*, and articulation like *Rall.*. The lyrics are "Et dans un Pain plus doux que la fraîcheur des é - toi - les,".

This clearly shows how Messiaen uses grace-note chords in Debussy to create his own music. Each group of four chords in his sequential *litanie harmonique* is a unit comprising a symmetrical pattern of dissonance - consonance - consonance - dissonance, which gives his music a certain rhythmic fluidity.

Like plainchant, appoggiaturas are used with varying degrees of success in Messiaen's early orchestral works. The following example from *Hymne au Saint*

*Sacrement* (in mode 2/3) is Messiaen's final 'development' of ex. 18 reminiscent of Wagner's 'Magic Fire' music from *Die Walküre* (in the same key of E major).<sup>38</sup>

Ex. 46 *Hymne au Saint Sacrement* 3 bars before fig. 28

The problem with this melody is that its almost completely static harmonisation relies solely on its own shape and the acciaccaturas in the accompaniment to give it character.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Messiaen states that this 'passionately mystical' work is 'dedicated to the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. It attempts to depict the marvellous gifts of communion: the growth of love and grace, the force against evil, and the promise of eternal life.' His description of 'passionately mystical' is from an autograph draft of notes for a *Jeune France* (a group comprising Messiaen, Baudrier, Daniel-Lesur and Jolivet) concert on 3 June 1936. The larger quote above is from Messiaen's spoken commentaries on *Les Offrandes oubliées* (for the same concert) in an undated letter of 1936 amongst the papers of André Coeuroy. In Nigel Simeone, 'Group identities', *The Musical Times*, Vol. 143 (Autumn 2002), 16 and 14 respectively.

<sup>39</sup> The woodwind and brass merely reinforce the prevailing chord, and are therefore contrapuntally negligible. The same problem occurs in *Le Tombeau resplendissant* from 4 bars after fig. 3 to 1 before fig. 7 which superficially pay homage to Stravinsky. The woodwind and brass rhythmic

A more interesting use of grace-note dissonance occurs in *Les Offrandes oubliées*. One can detect plainchant behind the beautiful melody (in mode 2/3) that opens *Offrandes*, expressive of *Les bras étendus* (in the accompanying poem). But its real plangency is created by the use of appoggiatura dissonances to the prevailing E minor harmony:<sup>40</sup>

Ex. 47 *Les Offrandes oubliées* (opening)<sup>41</sup>



This melody is then transformed into a Stravinskian trumpet cell at b. 53-6 and 61-5 in the fast middle section of the work, perhaps symbolic of the snake from the poem:<sup>42</sup>

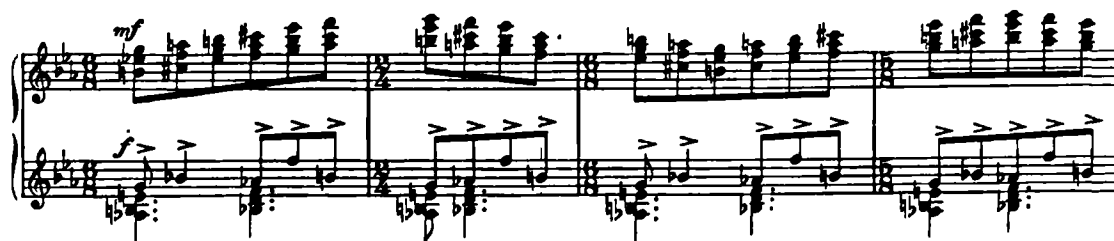
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cells reinforce the metrical changes in the strings rather than jaggedly juxtaposing and conflicting with this *mélodie principale*. In comparison with the *Turangalila-Symphonie* (1946-48 rev. 1990) perhaps Messiaen's most Stravinskian composition in this respect, where different planes are combined with different modes, *Tombeau* seems rather blanche and jejune.

<sup>40</sup> The following text appears on the frontispiece: *Les bras tendus, triste jusqu'à la mort, sur l'arbre de la Croix vous répandez votre sang. Vous nous aimez, doux Jésus, nous l'avions oublié. Poussés par la folie et le dard du serpent, dans une course haletante, effrénée, sans relâche, nous descendions dans la pèché comme dans un tombeau. Voici la table pure, la source de charité, le banquet du pauvre, voici la Pitié adorable offrant le pain de la Vie et de l'Amour. Vous nous aimez, doux Jésus nous l'avions oublié.*

<sup>41</sup> A similar example to this can be found at fig. 48 of *Tombeau* where the violas and 'cellos chant a melody against an E major chord (with added 6<sup>th</sup>).

<sup>42</sup> The central section of this work reveals Messiaen's Stravinskian ability to shift from one discrete cell or idea to another, and to shuffle their order to promote interest and continuity. This is the use of *personnages rythmiques*, discussed in Part III.

Ex. 48 *Les Offrandes oubliées* b. 61-4

In such a case it would tendentious to attribute the irregular grouping of ‘twos and threes’ in each bar to plainchant. What is really Stravinskian in this central section is the fact that Messiaen layers his texture so that the simpler of the two modes 2/2 is in the l.h. while the more complex (3/2) is in the r.h. He does this to achieve a more solid harmonic foundation with which the appoggiatura dissonances can resonate.<sup>43</sup> As in Stravinsky’s thinking and Messiaen’s hearing of Stravinsky, one could hear the r.h. either as added notes or appoggiaturas to the l.h. chords.<sup>44</sup> It would indeed be tendentious to ascribe the alternating groups of threes and twos in this example to plainchant. Nevertheless, ex. 48 demonstrates Messiaen’s ability to make a *rapprochement* between plainchant and his own *Mi*-Stravinsky.

It is such synthesis between plainchant and the accacciatura principle, and between composers such as Emmanuel, Albéniz, Wagner, Debussy, Ravel and Stravinsky, that is at the heart both of Messiaen’s burgeoning skill in these works, but, more importantly, also in the modernity that they impart. These aspects combine on

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<sup>43</sup> Messiaen does this elsewhere at the opening of *Les sons impalpables du rêve* (*Préludes*), *Les Bergers* (*La Nativité*) and *Action de grâces* (*Poèmes pour Mi*).

<sup>44</sup> Appoggiaturas become essential to whole passages in *Offrandes* b. 20-3 [preceded by b. 18-19 with their importation of the woodwind shriek that begins the *Glorification de l’élue* and a version of ex. 31 *Danse Sacrale*], b. 26-9, 37-48 and 76-92.

technical, musical and aesthetic levels to give Messiaen's music an enigmaticism, or perhaps more germanely to Chapter 1, a mysterious quality.

These early works reveal a composer beginning a search for self-revelation as a man and artist.<sup>45</sup> Even if some of the music does not sound like the Messiaen and some of the music lacks the character that we know from, (for example) *Poèmes pour Mi*, the use of the grace-note or acciaccatura principle and plainchant, seminal to Messiaen's early mature works, is already present in Messiaen's ear and pen.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Such is the subject-matter of *Le Tombeau resplendissant*. The poem on the title page of the hand-written manuscript reproduction deals with the death of youth as an umbrella-concept for anger, despair, tears (v. 1), illusion and melancholy (v. 2), and the furore and hurly-burly relinquished in the realisation/illumination of a *voix intérieure* and the coming of Christ. The poem finishes with a biblical quotation of Christ: 'Come unto me all ye who labour and I will give you rest. Happy are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Happy are those who cry, for they shall be consoled. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God'.

The *tombeau resplendissant* signifies not only the mystery of Christ's rise from the dead but also a symbol of the resurrection of mature spirituality after youth. More importantly, Messiaen is stating that the way out of our human difficulties is to turn to Christ and to come to a realisation of the presence of God in oneself that the individual, and humanity collectively, has ignored. This was an idea that Messiaen was to return to in the fourth tableau of his opera *St François d'Assise* (1975-1983) where Br Eli is too caught up with his own human troubles to realise that he is conversing with an emissary of God: *L'Ange Voyageur*.

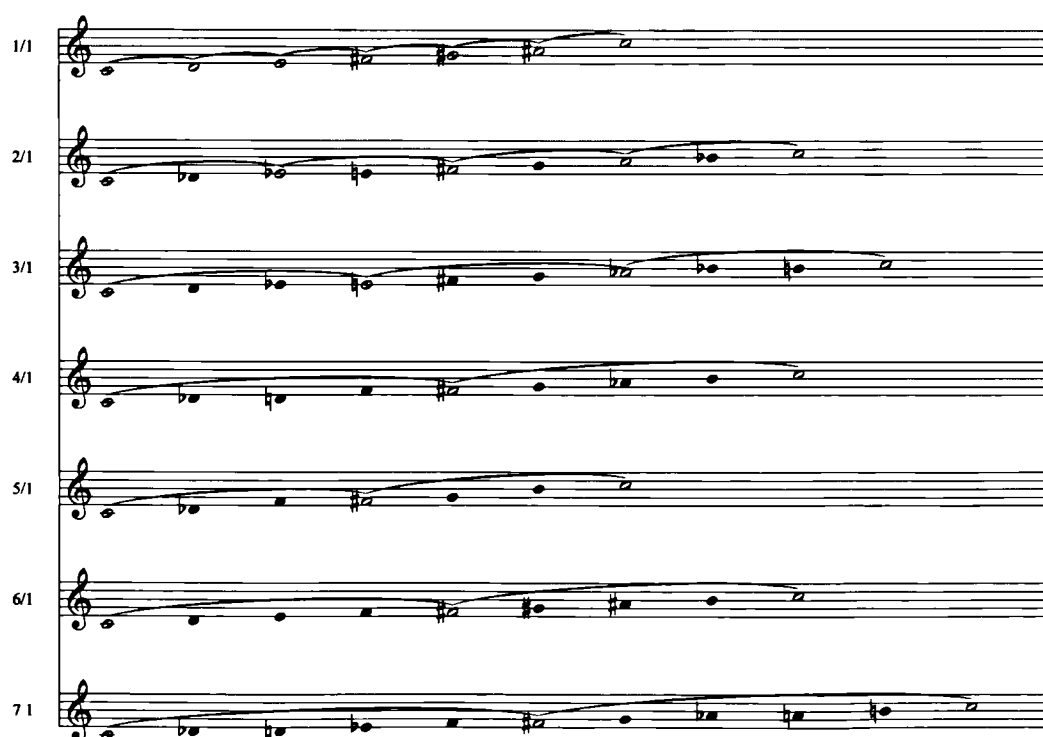
<sup>46</sup> *Hymne au Saint Sacrement* is almost exceptional in Messiaen's output. It has a traditional developmental quality to its music, relying on notions of repetition, contraction and extension of phrases. Indeed *Hymne* is probably the closest Messiaen got to writing a full-blown sonata-form movement which might be expressed as follows: **Exposition:** Theme 1 (*modéré*) - Theme 2 [fig. 3] (*Presque Lent* - variation of theme 1), **Development:** [fig. 6] 2 periods comprising a crescendo and an issue of the theme [fig. 6 - 3 after fig. 11, and 4 after fig. 11 - 1 before fig. 18] - transition (*Lent - modéré*), **Recapitulation:** Theme 1(*modéré*) [3 before fig. 20] - Theme 2 [fig. 22] (*Presque Lent*), **Coda:** in 2 sections: fig. 25 (using material from the development) and fig. 28.



## II Messiaen's Modes of Limited Transposition

The acciaccatura principle is at the root of Messiaen's modes of limited transposition - symmetrical modes that can only be transposed a certain number of times before returning to the pitch-classes of the original mode.<sup>47</sup> These modes are Messiaen's musical calling-card and, together with his harmonisations of them, these modes make Messiaen's music instantly recognisable. Here are the seven modes in their first transpositions with symmetrical divisions marked by open-headed notes. I call these hierarchically prominent notes 'sub-structures':

**Ex. 49** Messiaen's seven 'modes of limited transposition'



<sup>47</sup> *TMLM*, Vol. I, 58-63. For a later account of Messiaen's modes see *TRCO*, vol. VII.

For Messiaen, his modes are superficially unified by these symmetrical sub-structures. Mode 1 lacks a sub-structure and this is probably one of the main reasons why it is rarely used in his music, despite being the the *ne plus ultra* of symmetry.<sup>48</sup> In the diagram above, we can see that mode 2 is based on the alternation of semitones and tones. The accretion of minor thirds creates a diminished seventh sub-structure. Therefore, like the diminished seventh, mode 2 is transposable three times.<sup>49</sup> Mode 3 is based on the alternation of tone, semitone, semitone. It has an augmented-triad sub-structure, and so is transposable four times. Modes 4-7 have a tritone sub-structure and are consequently transposable six times.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Mode 1 is barely used in Messiaen's music because he believes that 'Claude Debussy, in *Pelléas et Mélisande*, and after him Paul Dukas, in *Ariane et Barbe-Bleue*, have made such remarkable use of it that there is nothing more to add.' *TMLM*, 59. Messiaen continues: 'Then we shall carefully avoid making use of it, unless it is concealed in a superimposition of modes which renders it recognisable ... (.)' The sole example of mode 1 used by itself in Messiaen's music is at b. 6 of *Les Anges (La Nativité du Seigneur)* where it appears as an epigonally imported *objet trouvée*. Mode 1 is usually concealed among other modes, as at the opening of *L'Ange aux parfums (Les Corps Glorieux)* [*TMLM*, vol. II, ex. 43]. In this example, mode 1 (sounding an octave higher than notated in the pedals) is infused with mode 2/1 (l.h.) and mode 3/3 (r.h.). It is this sort of polymodality that one can find in Tournemire's *L'Orgue Mystique* such as in the *Offertoire* for the *Office of the Assumption* (no. 35), a work that Messiaen describes as a '... slow procession, halts and distant songs, groups of flutes and nazard solos, a very special atmosphere where the chords of the 1<sup>st</sup> tableau of *Pelléas*, the Gregorian modes and certain more or less polytonal dissonances blend into a harmonic tissue of exquisite novelty.' 'L'Orgue Mystique de Tournemire', *Syrinx* (May 1938), 26-7, cited in liner notes for George Delvallée's recording of *L'Orgue Mystique: le Cycle de Pâques* Op. 56, 5, Accord 206002. Messiaen shows that the rhythm of the r.h. *personnage* (in ex. 43 of *TMLM*) is retrograded in the l.h. *personnage* while the pedal rhythm is non-retrogradable around a central value. In addition, the manuals' *personnages* undergo a process of elimination from b. 4, while the interlocking pedal *personnages* remain immutable. *TMLM*, 23-24.

<sup>49</sup> *TMLM*, 59. 'Mode 2 is transposable three times, as is the chord of the diminished seventh. It is divided into four symmetrical groups of three notes each'. A fourth transposition would return to the notes of the first. Therefore mode 2 is a 'mode of limited transposition'.

<sup>50</sup> *TMLM*, 58-63.

All this is clear from Messiaen's own writings. What is not clear is that Messiaen's symmetrical and non-hierarchical modes are used hierarchically, and in this he differs from the way other composers use the octatonic scale. For example, Messiaen creates his harmonies in mode 2 and 3 to give preference to the notes and the triads of the sub-structure as quasi-tonal foci while the black notes, in between the sub-structures above, and the non-triadic notes in his harmonisations, function like acciaccaturas to these nodal points. There is therefore a *rapprochement* between the idea of acciaccaturas as a linear and a harmonic phenomenon provided for in Messiaen's statement about grace notes in Albéniz's *Iberia*.

So, why does he do this? Fundamentally, Messiaen (like Debussy and Ravel) is a French composer whose primary concern is with harmony. Counterpoint, when it occurs in his music, is almost always controlled by harmonic concerns (rather than counterpoint that is self-substantiating and that may refer to an underlying harmony).<sup>51</sup> Messiaen begins to relinquish this control with the *style-oiseau*, and when he finally 'lets go' it is not counterpoint that results but heterophony.<sup>52</sup> His music is centred on harmony because he is fundamentally interested in 'complementary colours' and the 'natural resonance of sounding bodies'.<sup>53</sup> It was these two phenomena he states that 'drove [him] to work with these modes of limited transposition.'<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> This is a distinction that Boulez points to in 'Proposals', *Stocktakings from an Apprenticeship*, trans. Stephen Walsh, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 47-54. This article was first published in *Polyphonie*, no. 2 (1948), 65-72. I return to this idea in Part III.

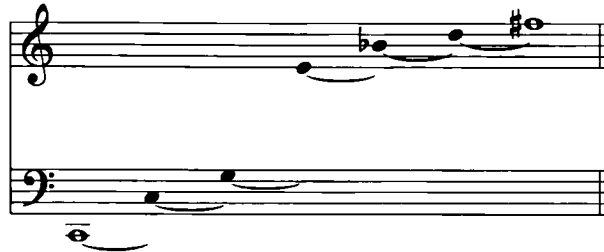
<sup>52</sup> The *style oiseau* is birdsong-like music that was either from Messiaen's imagination of birdsong or was transcribed from recordings of birds.

<sup>53</sup> Op. Cit., Rössler, 62. Messiaen states that '... in my opinion, one does not fully understand music if one has not often experienced these two phenomena. I return to this idea in Chapter 5.

<sup>54</sup> Op. Cit., Rössler, 76-77.

Messiaen is interested in the overtone series and the way its harmonics interact with the fundamental. The first three harmonics of any note produce a major triad, while the higher harmonics gradually colourise this with dissonances:

**Ex. 50** *TMLM*, Vol. II, ex. 70 Fundamental (C) with the first six overtones



Using Messiaen's hearing of harmony outlined in Part I, we can say that these 'added notes' are like appoggiaturas to the first five harmonics (the triad) that have been verticalised. This is why many of Messiaen's chords contain triads, and therefore have roots that give a legitimacy to thinking about his harmony as colour.<sup>55</sup> Colour and the movement of colours is created at the simplest level in Messiaen's harmonies by the movement between triads on tonal foci and the way these are infused with acciaccatura dissonances.

Messiaen's ideal of harmony can be seen in his harmonisation of mode 2/1. Each chord of this harmonisation contains a triad that belongs to the sub-structure (C, E flat, F# or A) while other notes function as acciaccaturas to the notes of these triads. Note also that four dominant seventh chords are present, again on notes belonging to the sub-structure:<sup>56</sup>

<sup>55</sup> In this one can detect the Rameauian idea of the *Corps Sonore*.

<sup>56</sup> Adorno writes: 'Even the more insensitive ear detects the shabbiness and exhaustion of the diminished seventh chord and certain chromatic modulatory tones in the salon music of the nineteenth century'. Op. Cit., *Philosophy of Modern Music*, 34. The use of the diminished

**Ex. 51** Messiaen's harmonisation of mode 2/1 containing triads and seventh chords

The idea of applying sub-posed roots (à la Rameau) has already been seen in relation to Messiaen's harmonic analysis of the refrain of Stravinsky's *Danse Sacrale*. I am here applying this 'hearing' to Messiaen's own chords. Moreover, bearing in mind Stravinsky's own statements about hearing the resolution of dissonant chords to consonant chords in *Poetics of Music*, we have a further legitimisation of this thinking. This sort of thinking is evident in the following examples from *Soupir* (*Trois Poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé*) and *Le Gibet* (*Gaspard de la Nuit*), which actually sound like Messiaen because of the cascading chords and ensuing resonance:

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seventh, as a background structure for the formation of triads, makes Messiaen's use of this symmetrical structure an advance on nineteenth-century practice.

Ex. 52 Ravel *Soupir* b. 22-7

Un peu plus lent

mire aux grands bassins sa lan - gueur in - fi - nie

Un peu plus lent

ppp

1<sup>er</sup> Mouvt

Et lais - se, sur l'eau morte où la

1<sup>er</sup> Mouvt

ppp

Ex. 53 Ravel *Le Gibet* b. 19-24

The musical score for Ravel's *Le Gibet*, measures 19-24, is presented in two systems. The notation is complex, featuring multiple staves with various musical notations including notes, rests, and dynamic markings. The key signature consists of two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The music is marked *ppp très lié* (pianissimo, very connected). The lyrics "un peu en dehors" and "toujours ppp" are visible. The score shows intricate chromatic movement and appoggiatura chords.

In both these examples mode 2 is underpinned by particular focal points ( $C^2$  in *Soupir* and A flat and  $b^1$  flat in the middle of the texture [b. 20-22], and G and  $a^1\sharp$  [b. 23-24] in *Le Gibet*).<sup>57</sup> Like we find in Ravel's music, the chromatic nature of Messiaen's music allows him to move from one mode to another and to imply modality while also implying a sense of a key. This modernist multivalency is demonstrated in the opening of *Fouillis d'arcs-en-ciel, pour l'Ange qui annonce la fin du Temps* (*Quatuor pour la*

<sup>57</sup> The example from *Soupir* is remarkable because the pitch-class spelling of mode 2/1 is exactly that given by Messiaen (B flat changes to A $\sharp$  in b. 27). In the last chord of b. 24 and 25, the B natural in the r.h. of the piano introduces a modal impurity that makes these chords belong to mode 3. The example from *Le Gibet* is likewise interesting for the ways in which Ravel unravels mode 2 using appoggiatura chords in b. 21 and 24.

*fin du Temps*), which flows freely between the four tonalities of the sub-structure of mode 2/1 (illustrated below by the use of sub-posed roots):<sup>58</sup>

**Ex. 54** *Fouillis d'arcs-en-ciel, pour l'Ange qui annonce la fin du Temps* (opening)

In this example, Messiaen implies, but ultimately differs from the Schoenbergian notion of a ‘sentence with liquidation’, i.e. statement in C (b. 1-3), complementary repetition down a minor 3<sup>rd</sup> (b. 4-6), and the ‘continuation’ down another minor 3<sup>rd</sup> at b. 7-12 exhibiting a logical disintegration of material (all phrases marked A). Although the form may be ‘traditional’, the repetitive nature of the content challenges such a

<sup>58</sup> *TMLM*, vol. 2, ex. 359, 54. In *TMLM*, Vol. I, 42, Messiaen states that this example shows a ‘complete sentence, in the second mode of limited transpositions, drifting between the tonalities of A major, F-sharp major, E-flat major.’ At a higher structural level the diminished seventh is ‘prolonged’ as a reference sonority.



notion even as it extends it. This sort of thinking underlines the modernist ambiguity of Messiaen's music that remains unexplained in *TMLM*.<sup>59</sup>

Transpositions, allusions to tonal centres, and fluctuations of notation effect subtle changes of colour and sustain the dramatic interest for the listener. A free flux between the four tonal centres creates a tonal lattice that tantalisingly alludes to but suspends the single unitary sense of tonality. Furthermore, Messiaen could in theory freely traverse the triadic centres of the three diminished sevenths, through modulation, and thus engender a sort of 'twelve-tone tonality', a complete spectrum of colours. Messiaen was afflicted with synaesthesia, meaning that he saw colours when he heard sounds. In Messiaen's *Note de l'Auteur* to his *Quatuor*, he speaks of their effect on him:

In my dreams, I hear and see classified chords and melodies, known colours and forms; but after this transitory stage, I pass into the unreal and undergo with ecstasy a whirling [*subis avec extase un tournoiement*], a gyratory insufflation [*compenetration giratoire*] of super-human sounds and colours. These swords of fire, these flows of blue-orange lava, and these brusque stars: here is the panoply [*fouillis*], here is the rainbow!<sup>60</sup>

Like the suffering 'compatiente' Durtal (in Huysmans's novels), Messiaen's mental anguish, as a prisoner of war, is sublimated into an apocalyptic vision and ecstatic language that suggests catharsis. The kaleidoscopic shifting of colours, such as in the

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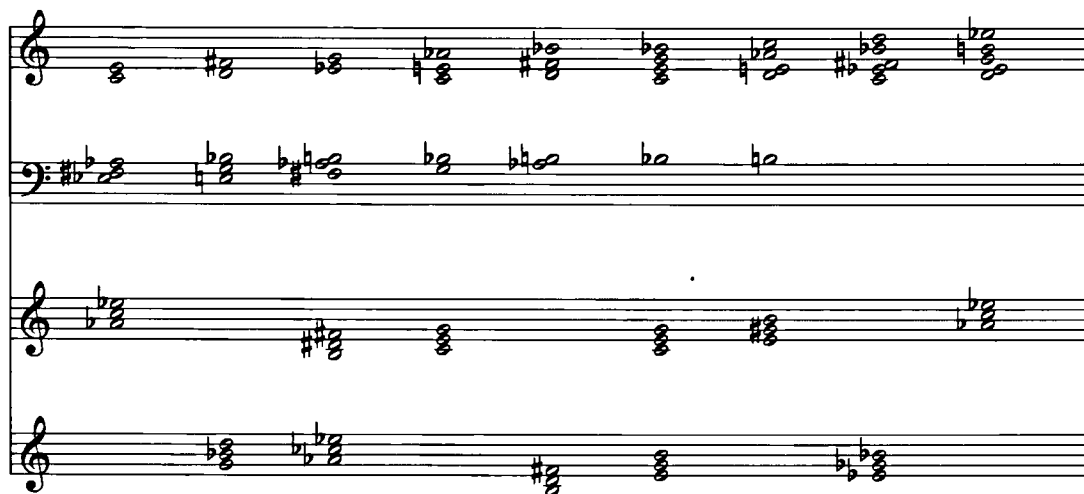
<sup>59</sup> Even when limited to four tonal centres, tonal ambiguity is not precluded. For instance the final chord of b. 3 is a chord of A major (with an added sixth), but it could be a chord of F# minor (with an added seventh). This underlines the equality of the sub-structure's constituents. Colour and variety are also engendered by change of note spelling.

<sup>60</sup> Messiaen, Olivier, *Préface* to the *Quatuor pour la fin du Temps*, II. See also *TMLM*, 52.

example above, pushes the soul *jusqu'au spasme* (Péladan): to the point where it lets go all mortal things and may perceive its own destiny in redemption. As a symbol of the colours of the New Jerusalem and the afterlife, the rainbow that Messiaen speaks of, like the 'tonality' in ex. 54, is appreciable and yet untouchable.

Colour becomes even more appreciable in mode 3, which takes its origin from the overtone series (ex. 50) highlighting the relationship of Messiaen's harmonies to 'sounding bodies'. Messiaen's five-note harmonisation contains a greater degree of acciaccatura dissonance to the triads belonging to the sub-structure:<sup>61</sup>

**Ex. 55** Messiaen's harmonisation of Mode 3/1 with extrapolated triads



Such complex chromaticism begins to blur any distinction between essential (triadic) notes and added notes whilst freeing the chords from a need to 'function' in a traditional sense. Indeed, given Messiaen's predilection for colour, it may be more aesthetically 'correct' not to make this distinction at all. The idea that, on the musical surface, Messiaen's complex chords reduce to simple chords or even triads, appears an

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<sup>61</sup> The idea of triads creating the impression of a mode is flagged by Messiaen, when he shows that the ensemble of triads (A minor and F# major [mode 2] together with D major) used at b. 31-5 of Debussy's *Feuilles mortes* (*Préludes* book 2, no.2) creates the brassy orange [*orange cuivré*] timbres of mode 3/3. *TRCO*, Vol. VI, 159.

attractive model. Simply to reconcile ‘unessential’ notes, acciaccaturas and added notes, with triads may seem a betrayal of their essential effect on the listener, but as I have shown in Part I of this chapter, there is evidence that Messiaen hears his chords this way.

Messiaen works with triads because of his interest in the ‘resonance of sounding bodies’ and nowhere is this clearer than in what he calls the ‘chord of resonance’ which contains ‘nearly all the notes perceptible, to an extremely fine ear, in the resonance of a low C’, i.e. the natural overtone series, and all the notes of mode 3/1.<sup>62</sup>

**Ex. 56** ‘Chord of Resonance’ containing all the notes of Mode 3/1.



This chord contains the first six harmonics present in ex.50. We can then hear the  $g^2\#$  and  $b^2$  either as higher harmonics, added notes or appoggiaturas to  $g^1$  and  $b^1$  flat.

Messiaen demonstrates how this chord is inverted, modulating from mode 3/2 to mode 3/3 (flat-side notation) via a common bass note. As higher-dominant chords, they each imply resolutions to F#, D and G flat respectively, without any necessity actually to resolve.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> *TMLM*, 50. One can hear how this chord has a very strong tonal grounding in C and yet is also a (dominant) seventh chord that need not function as a seventh. Such thinking is an intrinsic element of the harmonic languages of Debussy and Ravel. Op. Cit., Rössler, 76-77.

<sup>63</sup> ‘Inverted’ here means that the chords are inverted as normal but then reordered to have the same bass note.

Ex. 57 'Chord of Resonance' modulating from mode 3/2 to mode 3/3



Messiaen stretches the 'chord of resonance' over all four transpositions of mode 3.<sup>64</sup>

Ex. 58 'Chord of Resonance' (Mode 3) modulating through all four transpositions



As with the 'chord of resonance' in ex. 56 (on C), it is not difficult to perceive the triadic basis of these harmonies. But the relationship between triads in Messiaen's harmonies and the idea of resonance has another important and practical root. When Messiaen states that he 'progressively appropriated them [his modes] by improvising at the organ', he gives a very strong clue about the origin of his harmonic thinking.<sup>65</sup>

Messiaen's harmonies have their *raison d'être* in the characteristics of organ voicing.

The organ keyboard is smaller than the piano keyboard (usually C-c<sup>4</sup>). It need not be

<sup>64</sup> TMLM, Vol. II, ex. 212, 37.

<sup>65</sup> Messiaen interviewed in Jan. 1992 by Jean-Christophe Marti in *Messiaen: St François d'Assise*, L'Avant Scène Opera Guide (Salzburg Festival, 1992), 12.

larger than these five octaves because of the registral division of timbres (32, 16, 8, 4, 2 and 1 foot stops), along with stops like the nazard  $2^{2/3}$  and the tierce  $1^{3/5}$  that sound certain harmonics without the fundamental.<sup>66</sup>

The basic tone of the instrument is created by 8ft timbres which correspond with the range of the keyboard i.e. at C the pipe is 8ft long. Above this, the sounds get progressively higher as the pipes become commensurately shorter. On really fine instruments, such as Messiaen used to improvise and experiment on at La Trinité, the harmonic development changes in most stops, depending upon register, much like what happens in a clarinet. What generally happens is that stops become brighter, with less of the fundamental harmonics in them, as they ascend. As a result of this one can play a chord, such as the 'chord of resonance' (ex. 56) and have the notes at the bottom of the chord (i.e. the dominant seventh) sound *en dehors* whilst the notes at the top, because of the lack of fundamental in them, appear more and more as resonances.<sup>67</sup> This principle has not been explored in the Messiaen literature, but is absolutely fundamental to understanding how Messiaen's harmonic language developed.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> The nazard sounds a note a 12<sup>th</sup> above any note played, while the tierce sounds a 17<sup>th</sup> above.

<sup>67</sup> One can also see this principle working in the terms inferior and superior resonance which Messiaen seems to use to explain sounds deliberately placed extremely far below or above the body of the texture. Examples of inferior resonance can be found at the end of Ravel's *La vallée des cloches* (*Miroirs*) and in the last five bars of *Le Gibet* (*Gaspard de la nuit*) where the low pedal B flat functions as a resonator.

<sup>68</sup> The use of stops such as the nazard and tierce, used without an 8ft stop, is a great feature of Messiaen's organ writing (this idea can be found in the *Offertoire* of Tournemire's *L'Orgue Mystique* no. 22 (*V<sup>e</sup> Dimanche après Pâques*) where Tournemire writes for a 4 foot stop and the nazard alone in the l.h., and also in the *Prélude à l'Introït* of no. 26 (*La Sainte-Trinité*) where the nazard is used alone in the pedals. Messiaen uses the idea of mutation stops without an 8 foot timbre in the pedal part of *Le Banquet Céleste* and throughout his career (see the *Offertoire* and *Communion* from the *Messe de la Pentecôte* [1949-50] and *la joie de la grâce* from *Livre du Saint Sacrement* [1984], in which he substitutes the resonance of 16ft tone for 8ft tone, for particularly interesting examples). This thinking also affects Messiaen's orchestration where the

Furthermore this is why, in his later works, Messiaen is able to use twelve-note chords (as in the chorales at the end of *Chronochromie*) or freely use the twelve notes in close proximity, which sound grey and muddy in the hands of others, but which sound utterly radiant in his music. As a French composer intrinsically interested in the register, spacing, texture and colour of his chords (perhaps more than their actual pitch-class content), Messiaen's music therefore encourages as much as it resists any attempt to utilise serial thinking to explain it.<sup>69</sup>

In literally playing around with the effects of different chords, in different positions and in different timbres on the organ, Messiaen was able to create a certain sound world that was as unique to his ears as to his fingers. Indeed, one could go further and posit that, through the interaction of register, spacing, texture and harmonic colour, Messiaen is able to empower the metaphor of colour that, with its reference (in *Quatuor*) to the apocalyptic colours of the New Jerusalem, is fundamental to the communication of his music's eschatological topos.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the contextualisation of the 'chord of resonance' in the *Vocalise, pour l'Ange qui annonce la fin du Temps (Quatuor pour la fin du Temps)*.<sup>70</sup> The string's surreal and erotic *mélodie principale*, two octaves apart, swoons between A - D - A flat (and/or C - E flat - A flat) foci that are complemented and coloured by the piano's quartal harmonies and modulations between modes 2 and

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ear, as an extension of Stravinsky's thinking about the resolution of chords in *Poetics of Music*, is relied upon to fill in the missing resonance below chords. More particularly, as at the opening of *Couleurs de la Cité Céleste*, sub-posed resonances are potently suggested, through the spacing and timbre of his chords, even as Messiaen's chords remain strong in their parsimony and avoid such aspersions. Such chords are intrinsically modernist in their deracinated enigmaticism.

<sup>69</sup> See the articles by Allen Forte and Cheong Wai-Ling in *Music Analysis*, vol. 21, no.1 (March 2002).

<sup>70</sup> *TMLM*, Vol.II, ex. 222, 39.

3 that float over a bass that outlines diminished sevenths and  $D^6$  (with an added sixth):<sup>71</sup>

**Ex. 59** *Vocalise, pour l'Ange qui annonce la fin du Temps* b. 19-22

*Presque lent, impalpable, solennel*

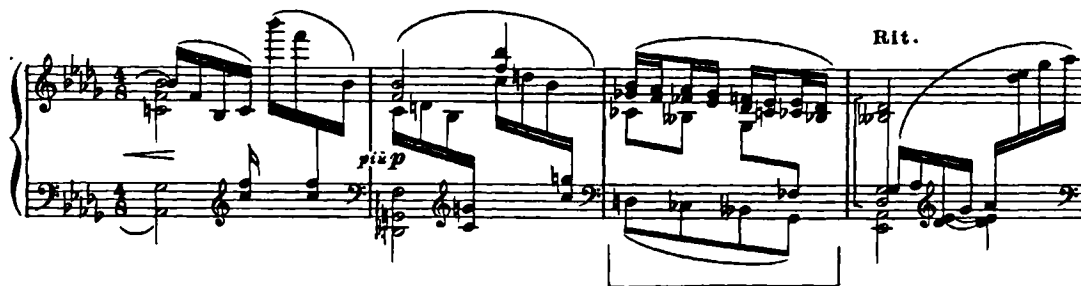
The musical score for Ex. 59 consists of four systems. The first system includes Violon, Violoncelle, Piano, and a Reduction of Strings and Piano. The Violon and Violoncelle parts are marked 'pp' and 'molto'. The Piano part features complex chords with figured bass notation (e.g., 2a, 2a, 2a, 2a, 2a, 2a, 2a, 2a). The Reduction part shows the string and piano accompaniment. The second system continues the Violon and Violoncelle parts, with the Piano part featuring more complex chords and figured bass notation (e.g., 2a, 2a, 2a, 2a, 2a, 2a, 2a, 2a). The Reduction part continues the string and piano accompaniment. The third system includes Violon, Violoncelle, Piano, and a Reduction of Strings and Piano. The Violon and Violoncelle parts are marked 'pp' and 'molto'. The Piano part features complex chords with figured bass notation (e.g., 2a, 2a, 2a, 2a, 2a, 2a, 2a, 2a). The Reduction part shows the string and piano accompaniment. The fourth system continues the Violon and Violoncelle parts, with the Piano part featuring more complex chords and figured bass notation (e.g., 2a, 2a, 2a, 2a, 2a, 2a, 2a, 2a). The Reduction part continues the string and piano accompaniment.

<sup>71</sup> In *TMLM*, 51, Messiaen describes these chords as a 'gentle cascade of blue-orange chords surrounding with its distant carillon the melody, quasi-plainchant, of the strings ...' This is a different use of the diminished seventh from that in mode 2.

Although one might detect the presence of two recurring tetrachords: D, B, A, F# and the diminished seventh on D flat/C# at the bottom of the piano chords, it is almost impossible to hear these tetrachords as the basis of his harmonies, making them an analytical fiction.<sup>72</sup> Such problems illustrate the limits of musical analysis and the descriptive power of language, as much as the reason perhaps why Messiaen quotes but does not analyse this passage in *TMLM*, and why he takes refuge in the broad metaphor of colour in his description.<sup>73</sup>

One can also see the acciaccatura principle in play throughout this passage. The piano part appears to originate in the double acciaccaturas at b. 14 of *Reflets dans l'eau* (*Images* Book 1). Messiaen shows how he puts this idea *en marche* (without the necessity to resolve):<sup>74</sup>

**Ex. 60** Debussy *Reflets dans l'eau* b. 12-15 (double appoggiaturas marked)



<sup>72</sup> If the l.h. piano chords could be considered as part of a modally defective B minor (i.e. with an A and a C natural), then the r.h. thirds and fourths, higher up on the piano and, like the organ pipes, with less fundamental in them, act to colour and diffuse any sense of controlling tonality.

<sup>73</sup> *TMLM*, 51.

<sup>74</sup> *TRCO*, Vol. VI, 17-18. Messiaen explains that he uses this in *La Bouscarle* from *Catalogue d'Oiseaux* (1956-8) but not in his *Quatuor*.



**Ex.61** Messiaen's use of the double appoggiaturas from ex. 60

The first four chords of Messiaen's extrapolation are the same as those used in b. 19 of *Vocalise* (ex. 59). Vertical lines on the above example mark points of confluence between the strings and piano that increase dramatically when the chords of resonance arrive. Resonance and colour are therefore created vertically and horizontally in this music with the resulting infusion of colours being anything but 'static'. Messiaen describes this effect in relation to stained-glass windows:

When you look at a stained-glass window, you don't see all the colours straight away. You have a sensation of colour and you are dazzled - you have to close your eyes. [Speaking of the Ste-Chapelle in Paris he says:] There are little figures depicting the lives of the Saints, the life of the Virgin Mary, the life of Christ, the life of the Old Testament prophets; and they especially show the life of Christ to its full advantage. There are all the scenes from the apocalypse, the end of the world that is, which is in effect a kind of pictorial catechism.<sup>75</sup>

Just as a stained-glass windows dazzles the onlooker with its profusion of colours, without initially allowing one to focus on the figures in the window, so are our ears 'charmed' by Messiaen's irradiation and diffusion of triadic harmony by added notes.

Such a rich tapestry of allusion is an intrinsically modernist aspect of Messiaen's language, intentionally ignored in *TMLM*, and it is an essential aspect of the communicative quality of Messiaen's music and of the non-traditional use of tonality.

In modes 4-5, triads are superseded by fourths, but the vestige of triadicism can still be posited in the presence of sub-posed roots again based on the thinking employed by Messiaen and Stravinsky above.<sup>76</sup> So why does Messiaen write his harmonisation as he does? Compare for instance the end of the second movement of Berg's *Lyric Suite* and the end of the *Poèmes pour Mi* in mode 4/5:<sup>77</sup>

**Ex. 62** Berg *Lyric Suite* Andante amoroso (end)



<sup>75</sup> Op. Cit., LWT, 19.

<sup>76</sup> For instance in the case of mode 4, each chord contains two notes from the two interlocking French sixth chords that form the mode itself, and therefore one can tendentiously ascribe sub-posed roots to Messiaen's harmonies. The French sixth is the only classifiable chord that can be derived from mode 5. Like mode 1, mode 5 is non-invertible because the interval structure is identical on either side of the tritone. Together with the fact that the French sixth is the only classifiable chord that can be derived from mode 5, this may account for the absence of any harmonisation in *TMLM*, with the notable exception of Messiaen's *accord de quarts* (*TMLM*, Vol. II, ex. 213, 37) which contains all the notes of mode 5. Messiaen's indifference towards mode 5 is evident in his music. It is almost exclusively used melodically as 'interventions' (a permutational technique), and only harmonically by default as part of textures. For an example of mode 5 see b. 17-19 of *Fouillis d'arcs-en-ciel, pour l'Ange qui annonce la fin du Temps* (*Quatuor pour la fin du Temps*). When mode 5 is used it is usually 'modally concealed', like mode 1, and is therefore relatively inconsequential in Messiaen's musical language.

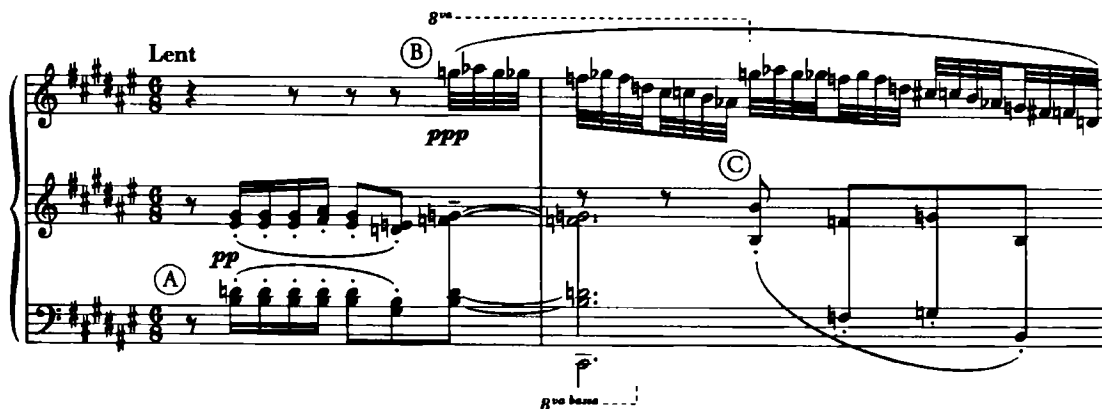
<sup>77</sup> C# and G in the l.h. in the final bar do not belong to this mode.

Ex. 63 Messiaen *Prière exaucée* (end):



Messiaen's mode 4/1 can be found in the flute-like arabesques of Debussy's *La terrasse des audiences du clair de lune* (*Préludes* Book 2 no.7):<sup>78</sup>

Ex. 64 Debussy *La terrasse des audiences du clair de lune* (opening)



This is strikingly similar to the Hindu mode that Tournemire uses like a *leitmotiv* in no. II (*Hodie mecum eris in Paradiso*) of his *Sept Chorals-Poèmes d'Orgue pour les sept paroles du Xrist* and the following example in no. V (*Sitio*) in which all the notes of the mode (r.h. top staff), with the exception of the D#, belong to mode 4/6:<sup>79</sup>

<sup>78</sup> TRCO, Vol. VI, 46-7.

<sup>79</sup> Messiaen draws attention to this Hindu mode in his review of Tournemire's *Seven Last Words* in *Le Monde Musical* of 31/3/1938 and republished in *L'Orgue, Cahiers et Mémoires*, no.41 (1989), 86. It is mode no. 36 in Messiaen's table of 72 Karnatic modes in TRCO, Vol. 1, 248.

Ex. 65 Tournemire *Hodie mecum eris in Paradiso* b. 21-3

Boîte fermée

II  
ad libitum

This Hindu mode is also used in b. 1-2 of the following example from the *Deuxième Fantaisie* (1936) for organ by Jehan Alain:<sup>80</sup>

Ex. 66 Alain *Deuxième Fantaisie* (last two systems)

Tir. Rec. seule

+ Soubasse 16

<sup>80</sup> Bar 8-9 of this example could belong to Karnatic mode 43 of Messiaen's table in *TRCO*, Vol. I, 249.

With mode 6 we return to the sort of triadic hierarchism of modes 2 and 3, whilst the context of its use can disrupt the sense of tonal foci. For instance, whilst the sub-posed roots of E and B could be ascertained for Messiaen's harmonisation of mode 6:

**Ex. 67** Messiaen's harmonisation of mode 6/1 with suggested sub-posed roots



Its use in *La Vierge et l'Enfant (La Nativité)* undermines more than it supports any such assertion. The shuffling of the r.h. cells with the l.h., and the interversonal permutation of four different pitches in the pedal (that sound an octave higher than notated), create a play between D, E and G#, tonal centres that abstains from any simplistic tonic-dominant style hierarchy:<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Messiaen derives his filigree *mélodie principale* from the plainchant melody *Puer natus in Bethlehem* by paraphrasing three aspects of this melody: its initial leap of a fifth (g<sup>1</sup>-d<sup>2</sup>), its ornamentation of d<sup>2</sup>, and the return to its *finalis* (g<sup>1</sup>). *TMLM*, Vol. I, 33 and Vol. II, ex. 108-109, 16. This plainchant melody *Puer natus est nobis* (*A boy is born to us*), is the Introit from the plainchant Propers for Christmas day. Most notably, it had been used as a basis for the *Symphonie Gothique* Op. 70 for Organ (1895) by Charles-Marie Widor (who was one of Messiaen's referees for his application for the post of organist at La Trinité) and it is also paraphrased in the *Prélude à l'Introit* of suite no. 3 (*Noël*) and no. 5 (*la Circoncision*) of

Ex. 68 *La Vierge et l'Enfant* b. 16-19

Tension and stability are suggested but undermined by Messiaen's chromatic harmony and the oscillation of focal points. These are analogous to the refraction of colours that realise the hypnotic and incantatory effect of this passage.<sup>82</sup>

Messiaen's harmonisation of mode 7 is infused with triads that, in their suggestion of multiple roots, underline the complexity and multivalence of Messiaen's harmonies:<sup>83</sup>

## Ex. 69 Messiaen harmonisation of mode 7

Tournemire's *L'Orgue Mystique*. In a letter to Tournemire on the 30 August 1930, Messiaen states that he has been attempting to play *L'Orgue Mystique* nos. 3 and 35 on the pedal piano while imagining the timbres [of the organ]. Op. Cit., Fauquet, 'Correspondance inédite', 80.

<sup>82</sup> This is especially true in large buildings with resonant acoustics, such as the *L'Église de La Trinité* where Messiaen was organist.

<sup>83</sup> Mode 3/1 is a sub-set of mode 7/1 and contains the complement of mode 7/1: E and B flat.

Bar 42-44 of the *Prière du Christ montant vers son Père (L'Ascension)* [1932-34] is a modally virtuosic passage that traverses the chromatic complexities of modes 2/2, 3/1 and 7/3 to arrive on a radiant 'dominant' chord, an image of the rites of passage that Christ had undergone before actually ascending to his Father:<sup>84</sup>

**Ex. 70** *Prière du Christ montant vers son Père* b. 42-44

The musical score for Ex. 70 consists of three staves. The top staff is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). It begins with a melodic line starting on G4, moving chromatically through A4, B4, and C5, with a 'più f' marking. The middle and bottom staves are in bass clef and provide harmonic support with chords. Roman numerals are placed below the bottom staff: 'I' under the first measure, 'VI' under the second, 'I or III' under the third, and 'V' under the fourth. Above the top staff, the modes 2/2, 3/1, and 7/3 are indicated over the first three measures respectively.

As in *Apparition de l'Eglise éternelle* (discussed in Chapter 1), we are given an image of the trajectory which we must follow in our daily lives and must one day follow in death. Messiaen's chords are so rich in triads that I could easily assume chord roots (based on the sub-structures for these modes/transposition) for mode 2/2 (C#, E, G and B flat), mode 3/1 (C, E and A flat) and mode 7/3 (F and B flat), and even propose Roman numerals in G major:<sup>85</sup> Other sub-posed roots are of course possible and those I

<sup>84</sup> The accompanying epigraph for this work, *Prayer from Christ ascending towards His Father* is, 'And now, O Father, I have manifested Thy name unto men ... and now, I am no more in the world, but these are in the world and I come to Thee'. (Prayer of Christ, St John 17:6, 11).

<sup>85</sup> The section in mode 4 relates more closely to Messiaen's harmonisation of mode 7, but I have called this mode 4, because all the notes of this mode are present (and mode 4 is a subset of mode 7).

have chosen are tendentious to say the least. Nevertheless, the degree to which such aspersions of stability are tenable or untenable reveals the degree to which Messiaen's modal music modernistically defers to and yet differs from traditional notions of tonality. The increasing chromaticism in this passage makes the cathartic consonance of b. 45 and the sense of release from turmoil all the more striking.<sup>86</sup>

What is clear from this example and others is that while mode implies certain cyclic self-referential relationships, the reality of the way Messiaen harmonises his modes with their infusion of triads and the acciaccatura technique leads to a sense of a non-traditional tonality. Furthermore, the hierarchical use of tonal centres in mode 2 and 3 becomes gradually more generalised as the complexity of Messiaen's harmonies suggests (sometimes multiple) tonal centres that do not necessarily belong to the sub-structures of the modes.

The enigmaticism of Messiaen's modes is intrinsically modernist and remains unexplored both in *TMLM* and in the Messiaen literature. Yet there is plenty of evidence even in *TMLM* to suggest that Messiaen knew about the modernism of his music but repressed this side of his work in his writings. Even as early as his candidature for the post of La Trinité we find him playing this aspect down for political reasons. In a letter to Tournemire he states that the priest at La Trinité had made three objections to his candidature: the necessity to fulfil military service, the Prix de Rome i.e. if Messiaen won it he would not be in Paris to play the organ, and thirdly: 'dissonant music'. Messiaen writes:

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<sup>86</sup> Throughout Messiaen's works second inversion chords, such as that used at b. 45, are given this topos of the eternal. Messiaen was not the only composer to realise the aesthetic possibilities of the second inversion chord. In many finales of Richard Strauss's operas i.e. *Der Rosenkavalier* (1909-10), *Die ägyptische Helena* (1923-7), he uses this chord almost meretriciously for its sense of opening another harmonic window onto the drama.



I have nullified the first two in my response. The third seems to be more important. I had effectively exaggerated my anarchic frolics [*ébats*] on the organ of La Trinité, when I was deputising there. I had seen myself alone, having a hold over my great instrument, and my faith, I had overstepped the mark: I was young! I was not even 20. From 20 to 22 there is a margin [of latitude] and I am more prudent now. I have therefore written to M. L'Abbé Hemmer that henceforth I shall be much wiser and that neither he nor his faithful will be able to complain about me. And I truly intend, while remaining myself, to be more calm, more measured, and more truly liturgical. And I am sure that everybody will be happy.<sup>87</sup>

It appears that Messiaen may have come too close to the modernist flame. While Messiaen was certainly pacifying a traditionalist priest, there is evidence in this letter to Tournemire of a maturing realisation that he must be 'more prudent' about the way he expresses his musical thought. Perhaps 'once bitten, twice shy' is the reason why Messiaen plays down the modernist aspect of his own music. In *TMLM*, Messiaen seems to make a conscious choice of avoiding ambiguous aspects of his work. That Messiaen was able to subvert modernism, through his religious aesthetics, and use mode as the basis of a holistic system, is one of his modernist *coups de grâce* that will be examined in the next section.

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<sup>87</sup> Op. Cit., Fauquet, 'Correspondance inédite', 80. When Messiaen's successor, Naji Hakim, took over the post of organist at La Trinité he was banned from improvising: it appears everybody may have had enough of 'the devil in the organ pipes'. Personal interview with Naji Hakim in 1994.

### III Towards a new synthesis: Modes and *personnages rythmiques*

In talking about any composer's music, it is often difficult to separate technical and aesthetic aspects. Nowhere is this more apparent than with Messiaen. To mention one aspect of his music sets off a chain of related associative principles. For instance, to speak of plainchant without the church modes (and the decadent aesthetic revival of mediaevalism) that informs them is unthinkable. Modes in Messiaen's music imply his Modes of Limited Transposition (which use the *acciaccatura* principle). The modes are individuated by certain harmonies that imply colours which have a synaesthetic dimension for the composer, and a theological dimension in that colour is a metaphor for the internal spiritual life, and, after death, our redemption in the many-coloured New Jerusalem. So, as will be shown, one thing leads to another and the links between these concepts will be unravelled as I outline a model of Messiaen's music.

Indeed, given such complicity, it is unsurprising that Messiaen propagates a unitary concept between pitch (modes) and rhythm, at the opening of his *TMLM*, that he calls:

The *charm of impossibilities* ... [which] resides particularly in certain mathematical impossibilities ... Modes which cannot be transposed beyond a certain number of transpositions, because one always falls into the same notes; rhythms which cannot be used in retrograde, because in such a case one finds the same order of values again - these are two striking impossibilities ... the rhythms realising in the horizontal direction (retrogradation) what the modes realise in the vertical direction (transposition). After this first relation, there is

another between values added to rhythms and notes added to chords. Finally, we superpose our rhythms; we also superpose our modes.<sup>88</sup>

For Messiaen ‘the charm of impossibilities’ was a divinely ordained effect that provided an umbrella concept with which he could reconcile disparate aspects of modern music. With its serendipitous ability to unify the pitch and rhythm - parameters that have largely remained apart in Western music since the 13<sup>th</sup> century - the ‘charm’ enables Messiaen to subtly position himself as thoroughly original and even as a redeemer come to make music whole again.<sup>89</sup> The ‘charm’ is an aid to the placation of the wiles of modernity mirrored in the destabilisation of traditional structural aspects of music, and in the breakdown over the ages of an intimate connection between pitch and rhythm; a metaphor for the relationship between Man and God.

While the ‘charm of impossibilities’ is a profound pedagogical and even ontological tool useful for understanding the overall thought of Messiaen, its strength as a unitary discourse is used by Messiaen to marginalise any manifestation of modernist multiple meaning in his music. When Messiaen states that ‘... After this first relation [non-retrogradable rhythms and his modes], there is another between values added to rhythms and notes added to chords. Finally, we superpose our rhythms; we also superpose our modes(.)’, he begins to stretch the credibility of the ‘charm’ through generalisation.<sup>90</sup> There are many examples of his music in *TMLM*, as we shall see, which reveal that the complexity in Messiaen’s early music, pregnant with

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<sup>88</sup> *TMLM*, 13.

<sup>89</sup> *TMLM*, 8.

<sup>90</sup> *TMLM*, 13. Non-retrogradable rhythms are rhythms that are mirror constructions i.e. they are the same played forward or backward.

‘possibilities’, only superficially conforms to his systemisation. Messiaen’s music therefore elucidates, extends and criticises his own unitary theory to breaking point.

Nevertheless there is a *rapprochement* between mode and rhythm, but at a level unexplained by Messiaen. One of the principal reasons that Messiaen’s music has proved so popular and understandable is that his approach to dissonance is fundamentally traditional. For most of his music, his chords are pregnant with triads while acciaccaturas or added notes colour them. Whilst functional diatonic tonality is not present in Messiaen’s music, neither is his music devoid of the vestige of tonality through the use of triadic harmony. Whether we call this ‘suspended’, ‘floating’ or some sort of ‘de-facto’ tonality seems academic when confronted with the modernist multivalency inherent in the way Messiaen implies and yet differs from tonality. To partner this new sort of tonality, I argue that Messiaen creates a new type of rhythmic rationalisation and synthesis of the traditional and non-traditional ideas of development: *personnages rythmiques*. Before discussing these rhythms I shall concentrate on mode and the way this extends into the notion of colour.

Messiaen’s modes are the most striking technical aspects of his music and, for the listener, constitute his musical signature. For Messiaen, the ‘charm’ of these modes lay in their divinely ordained symmetrical properties and in their musical ‘colour’:

I don’t believe in keys, in modes, in the serial or the aleatoric systems. I believe in two things because they exist as real, scientific and physical things: I believe in the resonance of sounding bodies and in the complementary colours ... They are the basis of everything that I’ve done.<sup>91</sup> My passion for the sound - colour relationship drove me to work with these modes of limited transposition. (...)

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<sup>91</sup> Op. Cit., Rössler, 115.

Each mode has a precisely definable colour, which changes every time it is transposed. That's important. For example, the 2<sup>nd</sup> mode has 3 colours, the 3<sup>rd</sup> mode, 4, and that yields a whole lot of colours which I can use as a painter uses his palette.<sup>92</sup>

Messiaen is pointing here to the uniqueness of his music and musical outlook, a differentiation that would blunt the knife of any commentator attempting to pigeon-hole him within any musical or artistic *-ism*. The originality of this outlook was undoubtedly nourished by his synaesthesia. The deeply subjective *son-couleur* relationship he experienced must have concretised his belief in the mediating power of music as a means of divine revelation and redemption at the same time as supporting his belief in himself as the 'liberator' of humanity.<sup>93</sup> For Messiaen it appears, mode was the phoenix, with its topos of austerity and anonymity and its links to the music of a pre-rationalist, pre-Enlightenment society, that would rise from the ashes of modernity to transfigure it.

Messiaen uses modes to create harmonies. Fired by his internal synaesthesia, these harmonies are coloured and for Messiaen are a tangible image both of a colourful internal life and also of the divine radiance that lightens all things and will be seen in its full glory after death. Modes are therefore the artisan's tools in the creation of the

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<sup>92</sup> Op. Cit., Rössler, 76-77.

<sup>93</sup> *TMLM*, 8. Messiaen quotes himself from an earlier unnamed source: ' "... there shall have to be a great artist who will be both a great artisan and a great Christian'. Let us hasten by our prayers the coming of the liberator.' He then quotes Ernest Hello, a writer of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Catholic literary revival discussed in Chapter 1: 'There is no one great except him to whom God speaks, and in the moment in which God speaks to him'. Ernest Hello, *Paroles de Dieu: Réflexions sur quelques textes sacrés*, texte présenté par François Angélier (Grenoble, Jérôme Millon, 1992), 196 and 197. This book was originally published by Victor Palmé in 1875 and then republished by Perrin in 1899.

colours of the New Jerusalem on earth through music. Colour and mode are therefore inextricably linked to the concepts of redemption discussed in Chapter 1. For Messiaen colour is the tangible and appreciable manifestation of the invisible presence of Christ.<sup>94</sup> Therefore by perceiving colour we perceive the presence of Christ within ourselves and begin to recognise our worldly folly so that we may be transformed through this recognisance and redeemed in Christ.

Although Messiaen acknowledges that listeners will not perceive the *son-couleur* relationship as he did, it is possible for us to hear changes of timbre or colour in Messiaen's chords manifest in the complex interplay of consonance and dissonance. For Messiaen, this interplay was present embryonically in the harmonisation of each transposition of the seven modes, individuated by their colours. In his internal vision, these colours are not present in each chord of his modal harmonisation but change as it progresses.<sup>95</sup> For instance, Messiaen hears the following colours in the three transpositions of mode 2:<sup>96</sup>

| Mode | Colours   |
|------|---|
| 2/1  | Blue-violet rocks, scattered little cubes of grey, cobalt blue, dark prussian blue, flecks of mauvish crimson, gold, red, ruby, mauve stars, black and white. |
| 2/2  | Spirals of gold and silver, against a background of vertical bands of brown and ruby red. Dominant: gold and brown.   |
| 2/3  | Foliage of clear and meadow green, with touches of blue, silver and reddish orange. Dominant: green.  |

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<sup>94</sup> Messiaen states: 'In my religion, we believe in the reality of the invisible and we believe in the resurrection of the flesh, the resurrection of the dead.' Op. Cit., LWT, 10.

<sup>95</sup> Witness Messiaen playing and describing mode 2/1 in LWT Op. Cit., 20 and 22. It is this aspect of movement that both seems to refer back to the universe in perpetual motion of Baudelaire's *Correspondances* and the possibility of change in the soul that will lead to redemption.

<sup>96</sup> Quoted in Claude Samuel, *Musique et Couleur* (Paris: Pierre Belfond, 1986), 68.

Messiaen frequently cites stained-glass windows and rainbows in his writings because, for him, they are tangible manifestations of God's radiance.<sup>97</sup> While modes and colours characterise his music, the *sons-couleur* relationship also placed a kind of restriction on Messiaen. The intense subjectivity of this phenomenon meant that he had strong preferences for certain colours, chords, timbres and durations that prejudiced him against others.<sup>98</sup> Yet these predilections, together with the ubiquity of the modes in Messiaen's music, create a *lingua franca* that makes his music instantly recognisable and gives it an integrity rare in twentieth-century music.

Seen chronologically, Messiaen's works are like panels in a set of stained-glass windows in which the language and colours become richer and more complex. The consistent re-contextualisation of his modes in different works was analogous to pouring old wine into new vessels. Through the consistent presence of these modes, Messiaen was able to create a litany of compositions by which he could confront the listener with his faith and subtly insist upon submission, repentance and redemption. By controlling a repertoire of colours and their movement, Messiaen's modes catalyse this process while also forming the balm that will soothe the festering wound of modernity. If modernity is symbolised in dissonance, as has been argued in Chapter 1, then the greater the dissonance of Messiaen's music, leading to such high points as *Chronochromie* (1959-60), then in theory, the greater the transformation or rationalisation of this dissonance as colour. Colour effectively placates modernity, and

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<sup>97</sup> This spectral fragmentation could be celebrated as a metaphor for a multifaceted God.

<sup>98</sup> Op. Cit., Goehr, 'The Messiaen Class', 47. 'Messiaen was absolutely predictable: more than any other musician I've ever come across he had very strong aural preferences. He liked certain chords or even durations ... for him they were, as he says in another context, *personnages*: they had personalities of their own.'

with colour having its root in mode, and mode in the ‘charm of impossibilities’, the potency of this idea as the panacea for modernity is underlined.

The archaic topos of the term ‘mode’ is an active ingredient of this balm. Through this term, Messiaen could place himself in a logical succession of composers from the Notre Dame School to the fetishisation of mode in Debussy, Ravel, Stravinsky (*pace* Messiaen) and Tournemire.<sup>99</sup> His self-identity as a Catholic artisan, composing in the spirit of the Middle Ages with the tools of his ancestors, but with the technical resources of the moderns, allowed him to believe that he was transcending modernity even as his music implied it.

This reveals a selective approach to his resources: that which Messiaen could or would not subsume, he rejected. For instance, in his youth Messiaen saw the partisan lines between Schoenberg and Stravinsky as a polarisation of ‘counterpoint and rhythm’ respectively. Because of his own interest in rhythm, and perhaps because of his prestigious position in France, Messiaen chose the early Stravinsky as one of his musical patriarchs.<sup>100</sup> It is absolutely clear that Messiaen recognised the early ballets of Stravinsky as modernist works, but understood them according to his own frame of reference and took what he needed.<sup>101</sup> In contradistinction, Messiaen felt alienated both

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<sup>99</sup> Holloway, Robin, ‘Modernism and After in Music’, *The Cambridge Review*, vol. 110 (June 1989), 61. Holloway describes this phenomenon as ‘the emancipation of the consonance’. With hindsight, one can see Messiaen’s early article on Stravinsky as a *petite annonce* of Messiaen’s link to the master of the modern, a connection concretised in the central section *Les Offrandes oubliées* (1930). See Messiaen, ‘Le rythme chez Igor Strawinsky’, *La Revue Musicale*, No.191, (1939), 331-32.

<sup>100</sup> Op. Cit., Rössler, 73-4

<sup>101</sup> Messiaen’s analysis of *Le Sacre du Printemps* is found in his *TRCO*, Vol. II, 93-147. Messiaen interprets Stravinsky’s rhythm in terms of Hindu rhythms and *personnages rythmiques*. Likewise, the octatonic scale is always referred to as mode 2. In Rössler, 103, Messiaen rejects Stravinsky’s neo-classical and serial music and says that he would ‘have done better to continue what he’d



from Schoenbergian dodecaphonism, with its compositional constrictions, and what he saw as ‘theoretically-based music’.<sup>102</sup>

Yet ironically, it was Messiaen who extended Schoenberg’s system to the parameters of rhythm, attack, dynamics, duration, and pitch in his short piano piece *Mode de valeurs et d’intensités* (1949-50), even though he felt that he was ‘swimming against the tide’.<sup>103</sup> It is significant that in the *Note de l’Auteur* for this piece, Messiaen does not speak of serial principles, but of modes.<sup>104</sup> The fact that he was able to subsume a compositional system that he felt uncomfortable with (a *modus operandi* that he was to adapt as *permutations symétriques* in his middle and late period works)

started, namely, to compose as a Russian in a Russian way’. Much recent writing on Stravinsky has been bent on showing that Stravinsky did continue to compose ‘in a Russian way’. See Richard Taruskin’s *Stravinsky and the Russian Traditions: a Biography of the Works through Mavra* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

<sup>102</sup> Op. Cit., Samuel, 53. Messiaen writes: ‘I do not consider the strictly serial works of Schoenberg totally successful’. In a conversation with Edith Walther in *Harmonie* (June/July 1970), p. 26, Messiaen speaks of the Second Viennese School: ‘The great Viennese, without apparent reason, loved the morbid. Schoenberg and Berg’s music is about all that passes in the night, the black, murder and the mad. I have a horror of the morbid and of all that lacks colour and which is therefore academically useless.’ Then perhaps speaking of certain nameless contemporaries he states: ‘There are very serious and competent musicians [whose music] evinces a profound boredom precisely because it has no colours, no contrasts, no reds, yellows or violets: it always rains!’ It is perhaps little wonder then that Messiaen minimises the modernity of his music in his writings, considering that he associates morbidity and colourlessness with modernism.

<sup>103</sup> Op. Cit., Rössler, 74. This piece was to have a marked effect on the subsequent music of Boulez’s *Structures 1a* (1951) and Stockhausen’s *Kreuzspiel* (1951). There is evidence that Messiaen was thinking about the extension of serialism before 1949. In a diary entry from 1945 he writes ‘faire des séries de tempo ...’, and in 1946 he make a note to himself to ‘Develop timbres, durations and nuances along serial principles.’ I am grateful to Nigel Simeone for this information. However, Messiaen also states that ‘it was in 1942, after an analysis of Berg’s *Lyric Suite* for my first harmony and composition students (Serge Nigg, Pierre Boulez, Jean-Louis Martinet) that I suggested the idea of making a series using all the elements of music: sounds, durations, intensities, attacks and timbres.’ Messiaen wrote this section of *TRCO* between 1952 and 1955. *TRCO*, Vol. VII, 44.

is indeed a testament to Messiaen's powers of transformation.<sup>105</sup> In Messiaen's hands, mode becomes a holistic term that, in *Mode de valeurs et d'intensités*, holds different musical parameters in a symbiotic relationship.<sup>106</sup> One can therefore speak equally of modes of rhythms and pitches - all part of Messiaen's 'charm'. The *esprit de jeux* between these parameters engenders a multivalent modal discourse - a *modus vivendi* that places Messiaen firmly in 'the line of French artists whose very last concern was with *restriction*'.<sup>107</sup>

The scale of this musical multivalency is rarely ever acknowledged by Messiaen. For instance he tells us that:

All the modes of limited transposition can be used melodically, and especially harmonically, melody and harmony *never leaving the notes of the mode* [my emphasis]. We spoke in Chapter I [*TMLM* quoted above] of the charm of impossibilities, their impossibility of transposition makes their strange charm. They are at once in the atmosphere of several tonalities, *without polytonality*, the composer being free to give predominance to one of the tonalities or to leave the tonal impression unsettled.<sup>108</sup>

Suggestions of ambiguity and multiple meaning are left tantalisingly unexplored in this statement. Even if he means such statements to be a gateway to understanding his own

<sup>104</sup> In the *Note de l'Auteur* Messiaen writes of his piece: 'Il est entièrement écrit dans le mode'.

<sup>105</sup> See *TRCO*, Vol. III, 7-76. Messiaen relates these to 'the charm of impossibilities' on p. 7.

<sup>106</sup> Jonathan Dunsby and Arnold Whittall, *Music Analysis in Theory and Practice* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), 173. Dunsby and Whittall define symbiosis as the 'balance between elements that remain distinct'.

<sup>107</sup> Boulez, Pierre, 'Olivier Messiaen: Vision and Revolution', *Orientations* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), 408. This part of this article dates from a text for a BBC television programme on 13 May, 1973.

creativity, with this statement he seems to open up a Pandora's box of 'possibilities', for which Messiaen lacks the will to fashion a key.

Messiaen has not been the only composer of the twentieth century to sideline ambiguities. In fact, of all twentieth-century composers Schoenberg and Stravinsky have been most at pains to sideline inconsistencies. Perhaps in this we can read something of the *Zeitgeist* that entails a necessity for artists to represent modern art with certainty as a pre-emptive defence against possible criticism. This in turn reflects a century that has searched for certainty and 'truth' through art but rarely found it. In his writings Messiaen is acutely aware of this, nowhere more than when he writes of the failure of this post-Enlightenment *Zeitgeist* and the necessity of giving our century the 'spring water for which it thirsts'.<sup>109</sup> For Messiaen, the certainty is what will save society and this translates into the certainty with which he speaks of his own music.

The problem is that this 'certainty' leads Messiaen to be economical with the truth. For instance his statement that his melodies and harmonies never leave the notes of the particular mode in play is patently wrong. Messiaen frequently uses defective modes in which notes are added or subtracted from the strict formations of modes in *TMLM*. He also combines modes to create new harmonies, and his notion of the 'atmosphere of several tonalities, *without polytonality*' suggests non-traditional notions of 'tonality' that remain unexplained.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> *TMLM*, 58.

<sup>109</sup> Op. Cit., Rössler, 10 (quoted in Chapter 1), 'Scientific research, mathematical proof, amassed biological experiments...', and *TMLM*, 8.

<sup>110</sup> Even if, in this statement, Messiaen was aiming to differentiate his music aesthetically from the polytonal works of *Les Six* (Milhaud in particular), his invocation of 'compositional freedom' suggests a rich musical language that remains unaccounted for. The formation of the group of composers known as *Le Jeune France*, which included Messiaen, was partly an aesthetic reaction to *Les Six*.

This musical complexity and multivalency challenges the exclusive category of 'staticism' that has become a *mot juste* of the Messiaen literature.<sup>111</sup> Peter Hill, writing in *The Messiaen Companion*, states that Messiaen's music 'accumulates [material], but it does not does not *develop* (in the accepted sense) or argue', and Anthony Pople in the same tome supports this when he says that 'Messiaen's music does not use its 'language' to narrate, to dramatise, nor even to express, but rather to *represent*'.<sup>112</sup> The idea is that there is a clear division in music between dialectically developing and non-developing (static) forms - the line historiographically and nationalistically drawn between Germany and France respectively. As I shall show, this idea is rather partisan, and the reality of Messiaen's music breaks apart such distinctions. Hill and Pople are really echoing Boulez's writings, even though Boulez does not mention staticism:

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On the issue of tonality Dunsby and Whittall state that, 'We believe that, while it is perfectly possible for a composer to juxtapose tonality (diatonic, extended, or implied) with atonality within one composition, the superimposition of one tonality on another actually creates atonality. One tonality cannot integrate with another, and the notion of simultaneous, independent functionalities is a contradiction, not an enhancement, of tonality's true, unitary nature'. Op. Cit., Dunsby and Whittall, 112-113. If this is the case, then Messiaen is creating a non-traditional notion of tonality.

<sup>111</sup> 'Symmetry of harmony and stasis of rhythm naturally have their consequences in a new conception of musical form. Indeed, nothing shows Messiaen's divergence from the Western tradition more plainly than the few early movements in which he attempted something like a sonata structure. Since the harmonic tensions that animate sonatas are absent, nothing of the sort is possible, and Messiaen's 'sonatas' divide into the closed periods of all his music. The suitable forms for those periods are repetitive cycles, verse-refrain structures and palindromes, all of which occur throughout Messiaen's music: they are essentially static forms, not created by the content but simply existing to present it, like an iconostasis.' Paul Griffiths, *Olivier Messiaen and the Music of Time* (London: Faber and Faber, 1985), 16. This view of Messiaen is tendentious if not specious. While the essential dialectic between form and content may be minimised in pieces like the *Strophes of Chronochromie*, it is by no means a *fait accompli* for all of Messiaen's music.

<sup>112</sup> Peter Hill and Anthony Pople in *The Messiaen Companion* ed. Peter Hill (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), on p. 5 and 16 respectively.

Messiaen's method never manages to fit in with his discourse, because he does not compose - he juxtaposes - and he constantly relies on an exclusively harmonic style of writing; I would almost call it accompanied melody.<sup>113</sup>

The whole German-Austrian musical tradition is fundamentally alien to him [Messiaen] in its need to express *evolution* and *continuity* in the handling of musical ideas - what the Germans themselves call *durchkomponieren*. (Just as we can speak of eclecticism in his choice of composers, so his actual style of writing - juxtaposing and superimposing rather than developing and transforming - may be called eclectic.)<sup>114</sup>

Boulez is referring to the technique of *personnages rythmiques*; Messiaen's theorisation of Stravinskian 'layering' and 'cell' techniques. In the first statement, made in 1948, we can not only detect Boulez' desire to distance himself from Messiaen (that can be seen musically in the *Flute Sonatina* [1946], *First Piano Sonata* [1946] and *Second Piano Sonata* [1946-1948] for instance), but also the rarefied intellectual politicisation and 'certainty' that went hand in hand with the music of the European post-war avant-garde.<sup>115</sup> But to define Messiaen's music as static, along such partisan lines and within one paradigm (form) is intellectually myopic. In fact, just as the

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<sup>113</sup> Op. Cit., Boulez, 'Proposals', 49. Boulez is pointing to a historical distinction between self-substantiating counterpoint that may have a firm harmonic basis, and the contrapuntal elaboration of harmony.

<sup>114</sup> Op. Cit., Boulez, 'Olivier Messiaen', *Orientations*, 407.

<sup>115</sup> In Boulez's *Le Marteau sans Maître* (1953-5), *personnages* constantly break down and re-form into other *personnages* (see for example movement IV *Commentaire II de 'bourreaux de solitude*). Messiaen's preoccupation with birdsong in his music of the same period can likewise be linked to his use of *personnages*.

complexity and colour of Messiaen's harmonies constantly break up any notion of staticism, so it can be seen that *personnages rythmiques* are a mode of development. In this sense there is a link between pitch and rhythm that is rooted in 'the charm of possibilities'. Indeed, it may be more fruitful to examine the ways in which Messiaen's music interacts with the 'dynamic' dialectical 'German-Austrian' tradition that Boulez is at pains to distinguish.<sup>116</sup>

'Staticism' seems to deny the 'eclectic' *esprit de jeux* between elements in Messiaen's music; an element that is present in the 'developing-variation' model of music in which the dialectical progression of material is as much defined by similarity as by its continual breaking with any *Urform* and reformation in different musical contexts under the influence of other musical parameters such as rhythm, timbre, texture etc.<sup>117</sup> Yet the real distinction between the procedures of Beethoven and Stravinsky is made by Messiaen himself. Messiaen's term *personnages rythmiques* is discussed in his analysis of *Le Sacre*:

In the language of the theatre, when a *personnage*, by its sentiments or actions, influences the sentiments or actions of other *personnages*, it 'leads' the production. If this first person strikes a second person; the first is active, the

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<sup>116</sup> I show how Messiaen's music can interact with this German tradition in my discussion of ex. 48 above. Dupré consciously sought to change the traditional French notion of counterpoint that elaborates a harmony, rather than counterpoint that is self-substantiating but may be underpinned by harmonies, through his *Trois Préludes et Fugues* Op. 7 (1912) and his *Cours Complet d'Improvisation à l'Orgue* (Paris: Leduc, 1937).

<sup>117</sup> In the traditional (Schoenbergian) conception of structure, a basic idea (*Grundgestalt* - a formative configuration of musical features which usually appears near the beginning of a work) is submitted to teleological transformation through time, underpinned or mediated by the tension between tonal regions. This dialectical process engenders logic and coherence in the work creating a dynamic tension between what has been, what is and what will be heard.

second is 'acted upon' [*agi*] or transformed by the first. The first takes an excessive importance, the second recedes. Imagine a third person, impassible, immobile, who looks on, who witnesses the conflict without intervening, making, as it were, forming the backdrop of the scene; we will have the three main possible scenic dispositions. Putting this in a rhythmic context, three rhythms repeat themselves alternatively. At each repetition, the first rhythm has more and more numerical values and a longer and longer duration: it expands; it is the 'leading' active *personnage*. At each repetition, the second rhythm has less and less numerical values and a shorter and shorter duration: it decreases: it is the person that is 'lead', acted upon, transformed and dominated by the other. At each repetition, the third rhythm stays exactly the same: it never changes: it is the immobile *personnage*. *Personnages rythmiques* have not emerged fully armed from Stravinskyian genius, as Athene was from the brain of Zeus. Ballet music, the company of dancers and ballet masters, in short the art of ballet, was certainly influenced by the rhythmic structure of Stravinsky. I find in *personnages rythmiques* a more singular and grandiose inheritance: the elimination and amplification in Beethoven. [...]

Amplification consists in enlarging a theme or a fragment of a theme by the addition of successive sounds and supplementary durations to the meter: related obviously to the expanding rhythm. Elimination diminishes a theme or fragments a theme by successive retractions of sounds and durations subtracted from the meter: related obviously to the decreasing rhythm.

The difference between the two procedures is that while Beethoven does not use elimination (or amplification alone) applied constantly to the same theme - Stravinsky enlarges and shortens alternatively diverse rhythmic figures.

*Chez* Beethoven, the theme is a human hero that is born, dies and is resurrected - *chez* Stravinsky, rhythms are living cells that wax and wane, that deliver a perpetual combat of comparative grandeur: 'I last longer than you, you last shorter than me' - and the inverse; they are perfectly defined by the expression: *personnages rythmiques*.<sup>118</sup>

The dramatism of this model is far from being static. *Personnages* articulate and distinguish discreet musical segments. They function actorially, changing by condition (expansion, contraction) and position (juxtaposition). Just because they have no *Urformen* does not mean that they do not develop in the traditional dialectical sense, but that they have other options that expand this traditional model.<sup>119</sup> Their identity can remain recognisable, aiding musical coherence, because of certain consistent musical features which I call their *idées*.<sup>120</sup> Because of their ability to transform

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<sup>118</sup> *TRCO*, Vol. II, 112-113. I have attempted to follow Messiaen's prose style as closely as possible. When Messiaen writes about the three rhythms in the example, he is not referring specifically to a point in *Le Sacre* but is speaking of his theory in abstraction as a general principle.

<sup>119</sup> 'Development by elimination' is a sub-category of *personnages*. This concept is derived from D'Indy's *Cours de Composition Musicale* (Paris: Durand, 1912). The inheritance of this term is best described by Schoenberg in *Fundamentals of Musical Composition* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967). On p. 58, Schoenberg writes: Liquidation consists in gradually eliminating characteristic features, until only uncharacteristic ones remain, which no longer demand a continuation. Often only residues remain, which have little in common with the basic motive'. Schoenberg's definitions of 'liquidation', reduction and condensation are all predicated on the dialectical relation of evolving material with a formative model or *Grundgestalt*. Schoenberg continues in footnote 1 on p. 59: 'Reduction may be accomplished by merely omitting a part of the model. Condensation implies compressing the content of the model, whereby even the order of the features may be somewhat changed'. Alexander Goehr (like Messiaen) prefers the word elimination to 'liquidation' in his review of 'Schoenberg's fundamentals', *The Musical Times*, January 1969, 36. In Messiaen's music, the 'characteristic features' remain, ensuring the identity of a *personnage*.

<sup>120</sup> It is possible to postulate a unity within Messiaen's music using the image of a Gothic Cathedral. Within the edifice of his collected works are cyclic pieces, in which different windows



themselves without necessarily taking recourse to a *Grundgestalt* or *Urform*, musical time is shaped by the accretion and consummation of *idées* and *personnages* as much as by their recontextualisation.<sup>121</sup> Messiaen's music often ends, not by any sense of cadential consummation, but by the sense that his *idées* have achieved saturation and have become a depleted resource.<sup>122</sup>

In the following example from Messiaen's song *Action de grâces (Poèmes pour Mi)*, the r.h. group of six chords (*personnage X*), and the l.h. group of 5 chords (*personnage Y*), are identifiable by their consistent 'melodic and harmonic successions ... the whole entirely independent of the rhythmic canon established between the hands at a quarter-note's distance'.<sup>123</sup> Messiaen's usage here is very different from the recontextualisation of the bassoon solo at the opening of *Le Sacre*; there is a much greater independence between the modes of limited transposition (pitch) and the rhythmic *modus operandi* (*personnages rythmiques*):<sup>124</sup>

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complement and enrich the meaning of each other, and, of course, single windows/works which radiate their own message to *les fidèles*. The complementation and contrast of larger panels, within these works, is paralleled by smaller *sons-couleur* panels of his modes and *personnages*. These in turn embody *idées* which are the smallest identifiable panes in Messiaen's musical cathedral.

<sup>121</sup> This model does not apply so much to pieces like *Le Banquet Céleste* and *Apparition de l'Église éternelle* which adapt more traditional forms (modified ternary form in both cases).

<sup>122</sup> This is a fascinating subject in itself and can easily apply to the way the sections in *Le Sacre* sometimes career into each other. Messiaen achieves this depletion by elimination, *rallentandi*, slowing of the harmonic rhythm, chromatic completion and other means.

<sup>123</sup> *TMLM*, 24.

Ex. 71 *Action de grâces* (opening)

The musical score for the opening of 'Action de grâces' is presented in three systems. The first system is marked 'Très modéré' and 'Piano'. It features two main melodic lines, X and Y, which are canonically related. The score includes various musical notations such as chords, rests, and dynamic markings like 'Piano' and 'f'. The score is divided into sections labeled A and B.

However, a canonic relationship between X and Y is really only distinguishable at the beginning of the example. After this, any sense of rapport between X and Y is immediately dissipated by their changing lengths (in semiquavers).<sup>125</sup> I call this continually shifting vertical non-alignment of *personnages*: 'shuffling'. While *personnages* X and Y remain identifiable by their *idées* (in this case a limited number of chords in each *personnage*), their canonic relationship is dissolved by this 'shuffling'. Each *personnage* consists of colourful triadic harmonies, derived from modes 3/2 in the r.h. and mode 2/1 in the l.h., which, through their shifting attack

<sup>124</sup> From the fourth entrance of X and the sixth of Y, the number of chords in each group is reduced, eventually stopping at letter A. This change in condition, but not quality of material, is an example of 'development by elimination'. The 'plus' signs signify added values.

<sup>125</sup> The crotchet rest at the beginning of the example could be included in the first value of *personnage* Y. Messiaen's inclusion of rests in a *personnage* creates what he calls '*sons tenues*' which play a major role in his analysis of *Les augures printaniers* from *Le Sacre*. See TRCO, Vol. II, 99-101.

points, kaleidoscopically allude to tonal centres.<sup>126</sup> Triads (both augmented and in inversions) are allowed to resonate with each other, irradiating Messiaen's texture in a manner that is anything but 'static'. For instance, in b.1, triads of D flat, A, and C major, are followed by the vertical alignment of an A and F# major triads (enharmonically) in 6-4 position. The F# major quality of this chord is undermined as much as supported by the resonances of the previous A and C major triads.<sup>127</sup> The brief confluence of sharp-side triads (A and F#) is then disrupted by the following superimposed A flat and F major triads (r.h). This admixture of triads (trichords) and tonal focal points effectively creates a new sort of multivalent tonality that is not polytonal, in the sense of music in one key being layered on top of another as one might find in Ives or Milhaud, but neither is it tonal in any traditional sense.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Because of the decay of the piano sound, one hears the individual triads more clearly than one would on the organ.

<sup>127</sup> This l.h. A major triad in b. 1 is re-contextualised and superimposed on the F# major chord in b. 1 via an octave transfer (shown on ex. 71).

<sup>128</sup> In a concert organised by *La Spirale* on 6 March 1936 of *Œuvres de Compositeurs Américains (Etats-Unis)* at the Salle des Concerts de la Schola Cantorum the following works were played. Harrison Kerr: *Quartet* (Quatuor Crévoisier); Roger Sessions: *Sonata* for Piano (Gisèle Kuhn, pf.) John Alden Carpenter: *Four Songs - Serenade, Slumber song, Youngman, chieftain, and Dark Hills* (Victor Prah, bar.; Olivier Messiaen, pf.); Wallingford Riegger: *Suite* for flute alone (Jan Merry, fl.); Isadore Freed: *Sonata* for Piano (Elen Foster, pf.); Charles Ives: *Five Songs: The Innate, Requiem, From "Paracelsus", Resolution and Majority* (Prah, Messiaen); Quincy Porter: *Suite* in E major for flute, violin and viola (Merry, Reyess, Simone Morand). These performances of Ives songs, according to the catalogue of Ives works, were all world premières. See James B. Sinclair, *A descriptive catalogue of the music of Charles Ives* (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1999). See also Nigel Simeone, 'Group identities', Op. Cit., 12. Messiaen's choice of Ives' songs is interesting because they are all strongly religious and yet use, especially in the case of *Majority* (1921) and *From "Paracelsus"* (1921), some of Ives' most radical musical language. Perhaps Messiaen chose these songs because they parallel (if not vindicate) his own aesthetic of conveying Catholic dogma through modernist music.

Unconstrained by metrical constrictions, the resonances between a limited repertoire of triads promote fleeting points of stability where one hears triadic trichords without reference to an underlying tonality. Indeed, the tonal impression is not only left ‘unsettled’, but is deliberately fragmented.<sup>129</sup> One could say that there is a form of development (between the *personnages* of X) inherent not only in the kaleidoscopic changing of rhythms and re-contextualisation of material against the l.h., but also in that the sense of this development is significantly weakened by the canon between the hands and the fact the X and Y use the same chords.

Messiaen’s *personnages* therefore facilitate an interlacing of modes, planes and colours. Such movement and change is far from the notion of ‘staticism’ and is indeed resolutely modernist in its reconfiguration of traditional models of development. But what makes the music more radical is the way in which this modernist aesthetic is embraced and subsumed by the redemptive aesthetics of colour and Catholicism.

The holistic and inclusive nature of *personnages* can be applied to all of Messiaen’s rhythmic techniques. For instance, *personnages* X could be repeated here *ad infinitum*.<sup>130</sup> In Messiaen’s language, it would then become a rhythmic pedal. The validity of such a model is justified because Messiaen himself limited the number of triads in play to those he obviously felt would give a certain colourist effect. By this pre-compositional decision, Messiaen frees his triads from any obligation to ‘function’

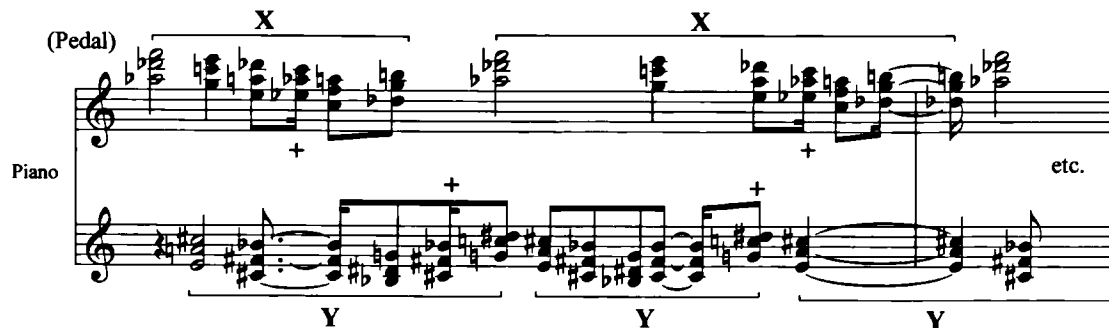
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<sup>129</sup> *TMLM*, 58.

<sup>130</sup> In reality, however, Messiaen’s *personnage* X is retrogradable; its rhythm is different whether read forwards or backwards: In *TMLM*, Messiaen draws our attention to the ‘added values at the crosses’ (marked on the main example above). If the chord at the first r.h. cross were an added value, it must have been added to something. But as there is no *Urform* for *personnage* X, it is logically incorrect to call it an ‘added value’. Messiaen is here codifying an imaginary figment of his musical language.

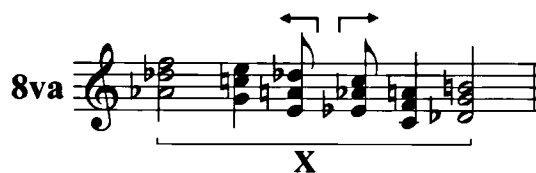
tonally.<sup>131</sup> So, a similar play of triads to that found in Messiaen's piece can be used with equal validity in my re-contextualisation of Messiaen's material:

**Ex. 72** Recontextualisation of *personnage rythmiques* from *Action de grâces* (opening)



I could transform it into a non-retrogradable rhythm, but it would still be recognisable as *personnage X* because its chords (and *idée*) remain:

**Ex. 73** *Personnage X* from *Action de grâces* (opening) as a non-retrogradable rhythm



<sup>131</sup> Whittall, Arnold, 'Review of Paul Griffiths' Olivier Messiaen and the Music of Time', *The Music Review*, no. 50, (1985), 227. Whittall intimates that a new understanding is necessary to understand: '... the ways in which, through modality, triads are not only "unloosed into new relationships", in Griffiths' phrase, but are unloosed into new non-relationships. This double process would seem a logical consequence of Griffiths' own excellent perception of the distinction between modality and tonality: a mode offers a fixed repertory, whose constituent pitches appear to have no other function than to represent that one repertory. Tonality, by contrast, provides a system of fixed relationships among different pitch-repertoires.' Whittall further points out that Griffiths seems to grant Messiaen's music attributes of functional tonality and yet denies this to Messiaen in his conclusion. I believe that the desire to find recognisable distinctions between modality and tonality is artificial in Messiaen's music, especially considering that Messiaen himself makes no such distinction in his music.

The multivalence of *personnages* informs Messiaen's adaptation of plainchant (in *La Vierge et l'Enfant* [*La Nativité du Seigneur*], as much as Greek and Hindu rhythms.<sup>132</sup> *Personnages* are a particularly useful tool for defining the characteristics and forms of Messiaen's birdsong because of the way they allow a discursive flow of similarity and difference between material. In doing so, they engender a more organic form of development that subsumes traditional models.<sup>133</sup>

Evidently the spectre of traditional 'development [which] implies not only growth, augmentation, extension and expansion, but also reduction, condensation, and intensification', haunts Messiaen's *personnages*.<sup>134</sup> All of these processes can occur, with or without reference to a rhythmic and melodic *Urform*. *Personnages* are therefore an important rationalisation and consequence of other ideas and embody a *rapprochement* between heterogenic and idiogenic extension principles.<sup>135</sup> Their antecedents are not only Germanic dialectical music of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (*pace* Schoenbergian theory) and the *idée fixe* of Berlioz, but can also be found in the music of the Ars Nova, Wagnerian *Leitmotiv* (as exemplified in *Der Ring des Nibelungen*), and the *personnages* of the (anti-Wagnerian) Stravinsky in *Le Sacre du Printemps*. Messiaen's musical heritage is nothing if not eclectic. His reconciliation of traditional development methods to create the fluidity of *personnages* parallels the

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<sup>132</sup> *Personnages* can also be extended to the description of birdsong, *Valeurs Irrationnelles* (TRCO, Vol. II, 405-434), *Métaboles* (TRCO, Vol. II, 513-26), 'Interversions' (TRCO, Vol. III, 319-344) and *Les Hors Tempo* (TRCO, Vol. III, 375-403).

<sup>133</sup> *Personnages* therefore had a huge impact on Messiaen's choice of refrain and verse structures, found throughout his works, which rely on subtle variation for narrative continuity.

<sup>134</sup> Op. Cit., Schoenberg, 58.

<sup>135</sup> Levarie, Siegmund and Ernst Levy, 'Phenomenalization', *Musical Morphology: A Discourse and a Dictionary* (Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1983), 212-13.

way his chords subsume traditional notions of tonality to create a higher level 'charm' that marks the originality of his works.

This sort of modernist complexity is purposefully ignored in *TMLM*, and points to one of the major critical problems in Messiaen's music: Messiaen's writings generally attempt to place him in a discourse outside and even at odds with modernity and modernism, whilst the complexity, multivalency and the degree to which Messiaen acts as a synthesiser of the past places him squarely in this discourse. By using the former to subvert the latter, Messiaen attempted to transfigure the aesthetics of modernity. The consequence of this is a religious modernism in music laden with the 'charm of *possibilities*'.

## Chapter 3: Of Time, Eternity and Love

Modernity is the transient, the fleeting, the contingent; it is one half of art, the other being the eternal and the immovable.<sup>1</sup>

In an interview with Claude Samuel given in 1962, Messiaen was asked if there was a *rapprochement* between mathematics and complex intellectual ideas in his music. In response he stated his opposition to all composers and men of our epoch because they were self-centred [*centré dans leur miroir*] and cerebral. In this he publicly affirms his own iconoclastic self-image as a man centred not on the human, with its implication of worldly wiles, but on the divine. He then reasserts his commitment to nature as the source of his music, a wellspring that for him reflects the beauty of the divine.<sup>2</sup> In doing this, Messiaen is once again propagating his image as a simple man of faith who loves God, time and nature; a man in but not of his age. Little wonder that this has become a familiar trope of Messiaen historiography creating a critical boundary line that other writers are loath to cross. Ideas and sources of inspiration not within this fence are then marginalised in constructing a picture of this composer.

As I have already indicated, a balance needs to be struck in this critical conundrum between the simple seer and his complex music. By assessing his music in relation to his sources of inspiration a better understanding of Messiaen's Christian world-view emerges. Messiaen is revealed as a more interesting composer than he implies and an intrinsically twentieth-century synthesiser of heterogeneous ideas. In this chapter, I

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<sup>1</sup> Baudelaire, Charles, 'The Painter of Modern Life', *Baudelaire: Selected writings on art and literature*, trans. with an introduction by P.E. Charvet (London: Penguin Classics, 1992), 403.

<sup>2</sup> *Entretien avec Olivier Messiaen*, Claude Samuel interviewing Messiaen, 11-13 October 1962 included with a recording of his *Turangalila-Symphonie*, Vega 30 BVG 1363. This interview was re-released on CD in 2001: *Le Monde de Messiaen*, Accord 4720312.



will discuss how Messiaen's music provides a critique of his own appropriation of notions of time and eternity from the mediaeval theologian St Thomas Aquinas (ca.1225-1273) and the French philosopher Henri Bergson (1859-1941). In Messiaen's music time is the agent through which an intimation of eternity and God's love are manifested. Therefore in Parts II and III respectively, I will use the writings of Dom Columba Marmion (1858-1923), one of his favourite theologians, to show how the notion of divine love, pregnant in the Catholic doctrines of predestination and filiation, can be revealed as the *raison d'être* of Messiaen's organ works *L'Ascension* (1933) and *La Nativité du Seigneur* (1935).

## I

In an address delivered at the conferral of the Erasmus prize on Messiaen in Amsterdam on 25 June 1971, he confirmed the status of time in his music:

First of all, I love time, because it's the starting point of all creation. Time presupposes change (and therefore Matter) and movement (and therefore Space and Life). Time makes eternity comprehensible to us by contrasting with it. Time ought to be the friend of all musicians.<sup>3</sup> I consider time and space creatures destined to disappear to make room for eternity ... For me, as a believer, death is only the passing to new life in eternity ...<sup>4</sup>

Time and eternity are therefore of paramount importance in Messiaen's aesthetics because, for him, they are inextricably linked with the profession of his Catholic faith through music - the expression of a subjective vision to an unbelieving world. Seven years later Messiaen was to state his case in a definitive manifesto:

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<sup>3</sup> Op. Cit., Rössler, 40.

<sup>4</sup> Samuel, Claude, *Olivier Messiaen, Music and Color: Conversations with Claude Samuel*, trans. E. Thomas Glasow (Portland, Oregon: Amadeus, 1994), 245.

Scientific research, mathematical proof, amassed biological experiments have not saved us from uncertainty. Quite the contrary, they have increased our ignorance by constantly revealing new realities within what was believed to be reality. In fact, the one sole reality is of a different order: it is to be found in the realm of Faith. Only by encountering another Being can we understand it.

But to do that we have to pass through death and resurrection, and that implies the leap out of temporal things. Strangely enough, music can prepare us for it, as a picture, as a reflection, as a symbol. In fact, music is a perpetual dialogue between space and time, between sound and colour, a dialogue which leads into a unification: Time is a space, sound is a colour, space is a complex of superimposed times, sound-complexes exist at the same time as complexes of colours. The musician who thinks, sees, hears, speaks, is able, by means of these fundamental ideas, to come closer to the next world to a certain extent. And, as St Thomas Aquinas says: music brings us to God through 'default of truth', until the day when He Himself will dazzle us with 'an excess of truth'. That is perhaps the significant meaning - and also the directional meaning - of music ...'<sup>5</sup>

I repeat this quote from Chapter 1 because it is such an important aesthetic statement. Time, space, sound and colour are for Messiaen the media through which we gain an intimation of the eternal. By 'default of truth', time is the means by which we learn to imitate Christ and are polished (like the stones of the church) to be made one with Christ in the New Jerusalem.

Given this love for time, it is unsurprising to find it at the head of his monumental *Traité de Rythme, de Couleur et d'Ornithologie*. Quoting St Thomas Aquinas at the outset: 'Eternity is wholly simultaneous, while in time there is a before and an after', Messiaen then elaborates this idea:<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Op. Cit., Rössler, 10.

<sup>6</sup> *TRCO*, Vol. I, 7.

‘God is eternal’ signifies not only that he will never end, but that he never had any beginning. Here is where temporal notions of ‘before’ and ‘after’ encumber us. To conceive of something without a beginning absolutely overwhelms us, we who have begun, first, in our mother’s womb, then in our earthly life. The same goes for other divine attributes.<sup>7</sup>

In theory then, for Messiaen and Aquinas time and eternity are mutually exclusive:

Time is a measure of creation, eternity is God himself. Eternity is indivisible, as God is indivisible. Time is not a finite length, which enters into an infinite length (eternity): it continues in the face of the indivisible (God). [Quoting Aquinas again] ‘Time responds to movement, while eternity remains the same.’ (*Summa Theologica*, ‘On the Eternity of God’, Article 4) ‘The instant of time offers itself to the mind like changing numbers [*le nombre du mobile*]: eternity is conceived like the immutable unity of being.’ (Aquinas, Commentaries on Aristotle’s the ‘Physics’) And more, ‘time measures not only that which effectively changes, but that which is changing: from where comes the measure not only of movement, but of repose, the state of being, born to move us and which actually does not move.’ (*Summa Theologica*, ‘On the Eternity of God’, Article 4)<sup>8</sup>

Messiaen concludes that ‘to speak of the immutable and indivisible is to name eternity, and to name eternity is to affirm the existence of God’<sup>9</sup>; a response that not only echoes Aquinas’s spiritual certainty but reflects Messiaen’s uncompromising nature and certain belief inherent in his faith.

By using Aquinas as an authoritative precedent, Messiaen can place himself in a long tradition of thinking about time reaching back to Aristotle’s important contribution in the *Physics*: ‘We say that time passes when we sense a before and

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<sup>7</sup> Op. Cit., Samuel, 28.

<sup>8</sup> *TRCO*, Vol. I, 7.

<sup>9</sup> *TRCO*, Vol. I, 7.

after in change. It follows, therefore, that time is consequent upon change in respect to a before and after'.<sup>10</sup> For Plotinus (c.205-70) time is 'the life of [the] soul in a movement of passage from one way of life to another' and eternity is immutable being.<sup>11</sup> Worldly things are subject to changeable time but the intelligence (or our state of being) is not subject to time and is therefore eternal. Plotinus also believed that eternity was omnipresent: 'That, then, which was not, and will not be, but *is* only, which has being which is static by not changing to the "will be", nor ever having changed, this is eternity'.<sup>12</sup>

Of particular note here in the linking of unchanging eternity with staticism, which goes part of the way to explaining why this has become such a trope of the Messiaen literature. St Augustine (354-430) then connects the immutability of God with other divine attributes:

Genuine eternity is that by which God is unchangeable, without beginning or end; consequently, He is also incorruptible. For one and the same thing is therefore said, whether God is called eternal or immortal, or incorruptible, or unchangeable.<sup>13</sup>

Aquinas and Messiaen were then on firm historical ground in their division of time and eternity. But why did Messiaen choose Aquinas as an authority? To a large extent

<sup>10</sup> Davies, Brian, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 106.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 103-4; Quoting Plotinus, 'On Eternity and Truth', *Enneads*, Vol. III, trans. A.H. Armstrong (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967); part 3, section 7, item. 11, p. 341, and part 3, section 7, item. 3, p. 305. On p. 305 Plotinus writes: 'The life then, which belongs to that which exists and is in being, all together and full, completely without extension or interval, is that which we are looking for, eternity.'

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., Plotinus, 'On Eternity and Truth', part 3, section 7, item 3, p. 305.

<sup>13</sup> Pike, Nelson, *God and Timelessness* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), 39. From St Augustine *The Trinity*, Book XV, Ch. 5, section 7. This passage translated by Stephen McKenna, (Washington, Washington Catholic University Press, 1963), 459.

Messiaen's response to Aquinas must have been culturally fashioned by the revival of Thomist studies precipitated in the late nineteenth century by Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Aeterni Patris* (1879), which had exhorted the theological value of Aquinas's work for education. A year later, his *Motu Proprio* not only promoted a new edition of Aquinas's works but also proclaimed him as the patron saint of Catholic schools throughout the world.<sup>14</sup> As such Aquinas also became a patron of the political right that held with the notion that the path to the divine led through traditional catechistic instruction and intellectual understanding.

The historian Theodore Zeldin points to the influence of the Third Republic's obsession with education and the explosion in graduate students in faculties of letters between 1900 and 1939; an explosion that included the young Olivier Messiaen at the Paris Conservatoire.<sup>15</sup> This increase in education only served to further fan the late nineteenth-century intellectual flames of the Catholic right's disenchantment with materialism, distrust of conventional morality, 'progress' and scientific positivism, and make their flame of desire for society's renewal burn more fiercely. All these aspects are fundamental political and aesthetic tenets of Péladan, Huysmans and Tournemire's world-view that Messiaen inherited as a young Catholic growing up in *Les Années Folles*.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Op. Cit., Griffiths, *The Reactionary Revolution: The Catholic Revival in French Literature 1870-1914*, 37.

<sup>15</sup> Zeldin, Theodore, *France 1848-1945, Vol.2: Intellect, Taste and Anxiety* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 1125. The last part of this book was republished as *Anxiety and Hypocrisy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 361. This was an education in which Messiaen's parents, the translator of Shakespeare and the poetess respectively, participated.

<sup>16</sup> For an overview of this period see Carol Mann's wonderful snapshot of the 'City of Light' in words and pictures *Paris: Artistic Life in the Twenties and Thirties* (London: Laurence King, 1996).

Such a deluge of cultural currents undoubtedly provided a strong breeding-ground for artists and intellectuals. Messiaen appeared to be born at an opportune time to take advantage of certain ideological proclivities to create a poetics of transcendence, revelation and mysticism that imbibed and even transformed intellectual concerns, worldly immanence and *la vie quotidienne*. As an axiomatic figure of the Catholic right, promoted through the intellectual Thomism of Jacques Maritain, Aquinas was a figure whose ideas were ripe for Messiaen's appropriation. Messiaen therefore places himself amongst the minions of the Catholic right every time he echoes mediaeval theologians such as Augustine and Aquinas and in so doing positions himself, like Tournemire, as a man looking back from the twentieth century to the austere glory days of the middle ages. I have already dealt with the spurious notion of staticism in Messiaen's music in Chapter 2, but in the following quotation he is again proclaiming this idea and linking it to the notion of the immutable property of God while invoking the already tired French artistic trope of Orientalism:

I'll take this opportunity to plead my own case: Japanese music is static, and I myself am a static composer because I believe in the invisible and in the beyond; I believe in eternity. Now, Orientals are on much closer terms with the beyond than we are, and that's why their music is static. The music written by me, a believer, is equally static.<sup>17</sup>

Yet, surely the idea of creating a music that, in Aquinas's words, was in '... repose, the state of being, born to move us and which actually does not move', had an inherent logical problem: how can something move if it is standing still?

What Messiaen needed was a more modern, more psychologically orientated theory to explain his aims. For this he could turn to the distinction between

consciousness and perception of time proposed in Henri Bergson's *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness* (1899).<sup>18</sup> Rather than distinguishing between time and eternity, Bergson distinguishes between 'real time' (*la durée*), which can only be understood psychologically or intuitively from contemplation and the apperception of memory, and time (*le temps*) which is homogenous and divisible. For Bergson, the introspective appreciation of *la durée* signified the heart of the individual that, beyond the power of language, scientific determinism had failed to uncover. Implicit here is a rejection of materialism in favour of subjective intuition [*l'intuition sensible*] that, for a young Catholic like Messiaen, must have confirmed his personal belief in divine revelation and his 'ministry' as a 'liberator'.<sup>19</sup>

Through the example of Achilles and the tortoise (from Zeno's paradoxes) Bergson shows that our conscious mind divides time to comprehend the space in which continuous movement occurs.<sup>20</sup> For example, we only notice time passing when we subjectively see the division of time on a clock face, but 'real time' exists beyond such division. Only by abandoning the world through self-contemplation, concentration on internal experience and memory can we perceive 'real time'. *La*

<sup>17</sup> Op. Cit., Samuel, 103-4.

<sup>18</sup> Bergson had an enormous influence on early twentieth-century intellectual life in France, his shadow falling across the works of Péguy, Valéry, Proust, Benda, Gide and later Sartre. See A.E. Pilkington, *Bergson and his influence: a reassessment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

<sup>19</sup> *TMLM*, 8.

<sup>20</sup> Zeno's paradox is that Achilles will never catch the tortoise because by the time he has arrived at the point where the tortoise was, it will have moved on a certain amount, and so on *ad infinitum*. Zeno confuses the movement in space with the divisible points of time in which they occur. Yet, Achilles movement is continuous and indivisible (like *la durée*). See also Jorge Luis

*durée* is qualitative while *le temps* is quantitative, a division observed by Messiaen when he made these ideas his own:<sup>21</sup>

| Appreciated time ( <i>la durée</i> )   | Structured time ( <i>le temps</i> )   |
|--|---|
| Time is concrete (evaluated by rapport with ourselves – it conforms to the succession of our conscious states)                     | Time is abstract (such as an empty frame [ <i>tel un cadre vide</i> ], in which we enter into the world and ourselves)  |
| Duration is heterogeneous (now rapid, now slow – with a thousand nuances of tempo, a prodigious variety of slowness and quickness) | Time is homogeneous (all the parts are identical)   |
| Duration is qualitative (dependent on our nature – immeasurable)   | Time is quantitative (measurable, numbered - relative to the phenomena that serve for its measurement [ <i>à sa mesure</i> ]: if the phenomena change, our structuring of time changes with it) |
| Duration is subjective (in us)   | Time is objective (outside ourselves)   |

For the church such subversive ideas, undermining catechistic teaching and therefore the church's authority, caused Bergson's works be put on their index of prohibited books in 1914. Of course, there is nothing more tempting than something that is forbidden, and even Maritain, who had been a staunch critic of Bergson, particularly in a series of lectures given in 1913, later on recognised Bergson's role in the revival of the Catholic faith: 'In fact, his [Bergson's] influence not only seems to have determined, for many young people, a movement of respect and of sympathy for

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Borges' fascinating essay on this paradox 'Avatars of the Tortoise', *Labyrinths* (London: Penguin Books, 1970), 237-43.

<sup>21</sup> *TRCO*, Vol. I, 12.



Christianity, but it was also the origin of many returns or conversions to the true faith.’<sup>22</sup>

Maritain’s fear that Bergson’s non-intellectual emphasis on *l’intuition sensible* would lead people astray from the traditional teachings of the church seems unfounded in Messiaen’s case. For Bergson, our apperception of *durée* is a recognition both of our intrinsic freedom from the spatially divided world and our ontological status as creative beings full of vitality or *élan vital*. For a Catholic such as Messiaen, one can see how this might have had a theological significance. It is a small step to equate *la durée* with eternity and to link the apperception of God through *l’intuition sensible* to the presence of God and the eternal within ourselves. If one believes that through the doctrine of predestination where, as Dom Columba Marmion teaches, we are made in the image of God and, through filiation, we are made one with God through the grace of baptism, called to follow and more importantly to imitate Christ, it only remains then for each individual to recognise the eternal or the presence of Christ within himself. For a Catholic such as Messiaen, freedom of will is given to each person ‘to take up his cross and follow Christ’ through a process of subjective recognisance, cathartic realisation and redemption; a process that in Messiaen’s aesthetics is catalysed by music that (paraphrasing Aquinas) ‘brings us to God through “default of truth”, until the day when He Himself will dazzle us with “an excess of truth”. That is perhaps the significant meaning - and also the directional meaning - of music ...’<sup>23</sup>

What Messiaen appears to be suggesting is that music can aid our apperception of this *durée*/eternity, abandoning clock-bound human time, and worldly

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<sup>22</sup> Maritain, Jacques, *La Philosophie Bergsonienne*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. 1948; cited in Pilkington Op. Cit., 230.

<sup>23</sup> Op. Cit., Rössler, 10.

wiles (like Durtal in Huysmans's novels), to enable us to perceive the eternal nature of God within ourselves wherein lies our freedom and salvation. Such thought locates our present condition as a state of incompleteness or, more accurately, an imperfect state of which we are made recognisant through faith, an idea that is prominent in the thought of Dom Columba Marmion. As a 'young and magnificent Christian Artist - pure Christian, of a *sound* 'mysticity', who 'prays and conceives his musical works to the glory of Christ(.)', Messiaen attempts to respond to what he sees as the need for God: 'to give to our century the spring water for which it thirsts'.<sup>24</sup> He attempts to configure his writings and music to be like a mirror (a prominent surrealist image and one used by St Paul in I Corinthians 13:12) that acts to afford us an intimation of our own potential and our true (Christ-like) nature that will only eventually be fully revealed to us at the moment of our death and entrance into eternity proper. Time for Messiaen is therefore the property of music that will precipitate our realisation of Christ. At the same time it is our role to participate in this process of seeking eternity and knowing God. So how are we to be empowered through human creative hands and the seemingly time-bound paradigm of music?

At the most fundamental level in his music, Messiaen attempts to achieve an intimation of the *durée*/eternity through a rethinking of the structure and effect of Western music, most prominently by the use of controlled asymmetry and irregularity. By freeing music from the control of metre, from the periodicity of phrases and structures associated with bar lines (through certain kinds of rhythms and *personnages rythmiques* for instance) Messiaen produces a qualitative change in the

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<sup>24</sup> Tournemire, Charles, letter of 23 July 1931 from the Île de Ouessant off the coast of Brittany, reprinted in Op. Cit., Schlee and Kämper, 141. The final quotation is from *TMLM*, 8.

ontological status of material through time. In other words, our ability to make comparisons based on the sort of patterns and structures found in previous music is confounded. Instead, we are forced to come closer to Messiaen's perception of the music in order to comprehend it. In so doing we are not only drawn into his vision but, because of the way Messiaen's writings foster the hegemonic view of his music, we risk the failure to discover fresh critical perspectives that have plagued the Messiaen literature.

In the light of this it becomes even more important to understand the ideological reasons why Messiaen imbibes 'staticism' as a description of his music. In professing this epistemology of musical time, Messiaen and others fail to take account of the ways in which his music does develop. Yet, perhaps as human beings conditioned to a certain kind of development, we have problems perceiving the level of staticism that Messiaen expects of us.<sup>25</sup>

This brings us to one of the problems of Messiaen's music. As imperfect beings, how can we attain a state where it is possible to abandon worldly clock-driven time, and intuit the *durée* or eternal and immutable nature of God via the medium of

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<sup>25</sup> See my article 'The true way', *The Musical Times*, May 1996, 35-7. Performers often have problems perceiving the extreme *lenteur* of Messiaen's music. In the case of *Apparition de l'Église éternelle* for instance, Louis Thiry's 1995 recording takes 8 minutes 27 seconds, Cocherneau in 1969 takes 8 minutes and 33 seconds, but Messiaen takes 10 minutes and 13 seconds on his recording, revealing a slower metabolic rate of the performer and the music. This performance problem points to an interesting aspect of Messiaen's music. In my article I highlight the problem that performers have of accustoming themselves to the speed of Messiaen's music and the way they tend to play faster to try and make the music 'make sense' i.e. so that the listener can perceive the relationship of phrases for instance. This seems, in the case of *Le Banquet Céleste* and *Apparition de l'Église éternelle*, to be contrary to the essential poeticism of these works which attempts to abandon such 'sense'. Traditional procedures of thinking about musical time may still be present, but they are obfuscated by tempo, duration and even timbre.

music? Or what happens if we perceive a higher-level development in Messiaen's music in which the so-called 'static' interacts with more traditional musical syntax through time? Such eventualities mean that any rigorous theoretical division of time and eternity such as that made by Aquinas seems to break down in Messiaen's music through the action of human intelligence, as much as anything, that seeks to make sense of the world. Perhaps this asymptotic state of becoming is premised in the plastic, humanly-created status of Messiaen's music, through which we are constantly being exhorted towards the *durée*/eternity, while our failure to achieve this is *prevue* as an integral part of our human *faiblesse*. After all, Messiaen himself has said 'I try to say what I can, with only the feeble voice of insignificant man in response to nature. Religion is there all the time. He is present in the trees, He is present in the mountains, He is present in the sky. God is present everywhere.'<sup>26</sup>

I now want to show how Messiaen provides an intimation of *durée*/eternity by using some extreme examples from his music. Perhaps the most revealing section of *TRCO* volume I is Messiaen's description of his rhythmic language entirely in terms drawn from the 120 *deçî-tâlas*, '*d'après le système de Çârngadeva*'. These provide a succinct window onto the origins of Messiaen's rhythmic language. It is little wonder that Messiaen was attracted to them considering that they have individual symbolic meanings, are mostly irregular and asymmetrical in their durational structures, and can function as *personnages* en miniature. Like *personnages*, these discrete segments of meaningful musical material reflect upon themselves, living, dying and being reborn or changed into other rhythms, in effect providing an allegory of transfiguration within his music. For instance, in his discussion of the power of prime numbers in his music Messiaen compares the *tâlas* numbers 88 (*Laksmîça*) and no.


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<sup>26</sup> Op. Cit., LWT, 2.

93 (*Râgavardhana*) and inadvertently shows how easily the first could be transformed into the second. The first *tâla* comprises seventeen demisemi-quavers and the second nineteen. In addition they illustrate both how the addition (on the final value of no. 93) or subtraction (on the third value of no. 93) of a small metrical value creates rhythmic instability and malleability.<sup>27</sup>

Ex. 74 Hindu Rhythms *Lakṣmīṣa* and *Râgavardhana* (after Çârṅgadeva)

(*Lakṣmīṣa*) : 

(*Râgavardhana*) : 

In so doing, Messiaen is playing with our human inability to distinguish small differences. Messiaen confuses our sense of the measurable (human clock-bound time) in order to direct us towards the immeasurable (the *durée*/eternity of God).

Even more perplexing is the idea that, for all we know, the final duration of *Râgavardhana* may actually go on forever. For instance if this value were played by a drum, we would only hear the attack and not the end of the note (except maybe if the resonance were manually stopped). This musical distinction between duration and

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<sup>27</sup> *TRCO*, Vol. I, 264-70. He also shows the retraction of a dot, addition of a value (*manthikâ*), the principle of the growth and decrease in a pair of values (*Simhavikrîdita*), non-retrogradable rhythms (*Vijaya*), rhythms followed by their augmentation or diminution (*Vasanta*), Inexact augmentation and diminution, (*Lakṣmīṣa*), 'the principle of chromatic durations' where *Râjamârtanda* shows a 'decrescendo of values' (an idea expanded to include a 'chromatic scale of values' that may be the origin of Messiaen's thinking in *Mode de Valeurs et d'intensités*), 'dissociation and coagulation' where a rhythm such as *Râgavardhana* is divided in two and the second half is an approximate metrical expansion of the first half (coagulation). Further to this Messiaen states that 'dissociation or dissolution is the inverse procedure: a long duration is replaced by several breves, having the same value as the total of that long duration [*longue*]: I also call this 'minting' [*le monnayage*]. These principles are then available in any combination.

time is theorised in what Messiaen calls the '*loi des rapports attaque-durée*: of equal duration, a brief sound followed by a silence appears longer than a prolonged sound'.<sup>28</sup> A sound may begin with an agogic or expressive accent with the ensuing decay or silence providing the duration of the note. Messiaen states that:

One knows that, in the appreciation of musical time, memory and expectation play a great role, such that memory and intuition have so much and perhaps more importance than the immediate and direct hearing. All sound-durations (*sons-durées*) are perceived by me and related in my mind to preceding sound durations (that I already know), and thus to the following sound-duration (that I do not yet know). In the application of the *rapports attaque-durée*, the mind conserves the memory of a certain number of events, and it is the number which influences the appreciation of durations<sup>29</sup>

Our memory of the first three durations of *Râgavardhana*, *selon* Messiaen, cannot prepare us for the final one that appears to be much longer because of its resonance into the void of silence that follow it. Our human faculties struggle and fail to perceive such quantitative change, and therefore we are forced to find some other qualitative means of comparison such as timbre and colour which, in Messiaen's aesthetics, is a metaphor for our apperception 'through a glass darkly' of the real presence of God.<sup>30</sup>

What Messiaen seems to be concerned with is our selective human perception of music. In other words, he is suggesting that the ways in which our minds grasp the most strident effects does not necessarily correspond with the reality or context of those events. Messiaen seems to be encouraging us to listen to his music not

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<sup>28</sup> *TRCO*, Vol. I, 23.

<sup>29</sup> *TRCO*, Vol. I, 24.

necessarily only for its unity or ‘organicism’, but to music as a narrative that relies on the apperception and memory of the most unusual aspects of music that reveal themselves to our conscience through time. We are then empowered to listen for feeling, texture and colour, all prime concerns of Debussy and Ravel for instance, as much as or more than formalist concerns as our consciousness is confounded by controlled asymmetry. Such a theory seems attuned to how we listen to music and begin to infer meaning from it, using our memories to project what we are hearing back in time onto what we have heard, including other pieces of music.

So where did Messiaen get such an idea? One can find moments throughout music where the relative length of notes disrupts our sense of tempo (such as the opening of Beethoven’s C minor piano sonata Op. 111 (1821/22) or Schubert’s G major piano sonata Op. 78, D. 894 (1826) or in the way that polyphonic voices in Machaut’s music for instance fill out and clarify the tactus of longer notes in a *Cantus firmus*.

Something similar can be seen in the following example from *Les Augures Printaniers* from Stravinsky’s *Le Sacre du Printemps*, where the string chords fill out the rests in between the horn chords.<sup>31</sup> Messiaen identifies in this section a purely rhythmic theme, which he says is perhaps the first occurrence of such an idea in Occidental music. This theme, according to Messiaen, has three rhythmic orders - a qualitative order (long and short durations), a dynamic order (intensity and density), and a phonetic order (timbres and attacks). These take precedence over the metrical

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<sup>30</sup> I will come back to this important idea in the next chapter. ‘Through a glass darkly’ is a reference to St Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians 13:12.

<sup>31</sup> I choose this example because it shows again the debt that Messiaen owes to Stravinsky. Messiaen’s analysis of *Le Sacre* is in *TRCO*, vol. II, 93-147, with the section on *Les Augures*

order of the time signature, which he says is fictitious and only for the conductor. The ‘theme’ Messiaen is referring to is the horn’s onomatopoeia of savagery:<sup>32</sup>

**Ex. 75** Stravinsky *Le Sacre du Printemps* (*Les Augures Printaniers*) fig. 13

Messiaen is arguing that our aesthetic sense of this passage is determined by our inability to distinguish the distance between the horn chords, despite the strings providing a background *mise en marche*. Furthermore, this example shows very clearly Messiaen’s derivation of *personnages rythmiques*. *Personnage A* (containing 2, 3 and 5 quavers respectively) increases but *personnage B* (entailing 6, 4 and 3 quavers) decreases. While it may be possible to hear the ‘unity of value’ of each chord and its succeeding rest (‘minting’ in Messiaen’s terminology), it is still uncertain how one is to distinguish between *personnages A* and *B* given that they have the same timbre. Indeed our perception of their irregularity is essential to their topos of

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*printaniers* on pp. 99-101, is followed by another explanation of the *Loi des rapports attaque-durée*, p. 101.

<sup>32</sup> I have included Boulez’s use of *personnages* on this example, an idea that dominates his essay on *Le Sacre*; ‘Stravinsky Remains’, *Stocktakings From an Apprenticeship*, Op. Cit., 55-110; see in particular pp. 68-70. Boulez begins with a near quote of Messiaen: ‘To my mind the most important feature of *The Rite* is the appearance of a genuine rhythmic theme, enjoying a life of its own within an unchanging vertical sonority.’



savagery. In perplexing the mind, Stravinsky, in Messiaen's hearing of this passage, challenges us to try and find a pattern to comprehend this passage even as our human programming prevents us from abandoning time for any sort of utopian concept of eternity.

Perhaps the *locus classicus* of Messiaen's attempts to confuse our sense of duration is at the opening of *Les Mains de l'Abîme* (*Livre d'Orgue*), where he requires us to differentiate between very short and very long durations:

Ex. 76 *Les Mains de l'Abîme* (opening)



Even once we have experienced the very short duration (at the end of b. 2) it is well nigh impossible to perceive the values inside or the exact length of the larger duration or to differentiate the two values in the pedals. It remains a mystery even though we have lived through it. Eternity is symbolised in this music by the modernist juxtaposition of temporal paradigms, as it is in other works where *personnages* move at different speeds and in different directions (retrogradable and non-retrogradable rhythms). These are born, in Messiaen's aesthetics, to take on a life of their own, challenging and confounding our human sense of temporal space and providing a contiguous relationship with our own lived time and thus reminding us of our own mortality and imperfection. Furthermore, the ontological status of controlled

asymmetry may imply the overarching hand of a creator attempting to bring to perfection asymptotically that which is intrinsically human and imperfect. As such this may reinforce Messiaen's self-appointed status as the 'liberator' or transformer of society.<sup>33</sup>

Examples 75 and 76 reveal again how Messiaen's writings and aesthetics attempt to transfigure his modernist music as religious, and in doing so engender a new layer of modernist juxtaposition and ambiguity. Just as *Le Banquet Céleste* challenges traditional modes of hearing (through extreme tempi, unfathomably long notes of different lengths [b. 1 and 3] and contracting and then expanding values), ex. 76 likewise attempts to draw us into a world with its own metabolic rate outside *la vie quotidienne*, and thus seeks to change from within our own appreciation of our lives.<sup>34</sup> By learning to attune oneself to Messiaen's music on repeated hearings, we may indeed recognise our state of becoming, comprehend both the layering and passing of time and perhaps even an intimation of our own presence in eternity.

## II

At the base of Messiaen's conception of time and eternity is a reciprocity between God, nature, humanity and music. In the first part of *TRCO*, nature's sounds, birdsong, water, mountains, rocks, glaciers, flowers, animals (symbolised in Hindu rhythms) and finally human actions (dance, language and poetry, and the plastic arts) are placed contiguously together not so much to show their relationship but, in the symbolist

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<sup>33</sup> *TMLM*, 8.

sense, to show their *correspondences*. While each of these has its own mode of being-in-time, for Messiaen, the wonder of such profound contiguity of temporal paradigms and their interaction in a convoluted universe, implies if not necessitates the hand of an overarching creator. When once asked by Luciano Berio, ‘What is music?’, Messiaen replied that this question could not even be answered in a book of twenty thousand pages.<sup>35</sup> When asked why he composed, he replied: ‘Why is your hair that colour, why are you married? Why are you not? etc’. For Messiaen, such issues were pre-ordained:

I don’t believe in chance because I am a Christian; I believe in providence and I think that everything that happens is foreseen. Of course, there are choices to be made, but for God, who sees all things simultaneously, there is no chance(.) ... It’s unthinkable that man, who by his very nature has only a fragmentary and, above all, chronological view of things, could conceive of all the possibilities with their consequences on any subject: that belongs to God alone.<sup>36</sup>

For Messiaen, God’s omniscience contrasts with our human imperfection and ignorance. Such a philosophy is present in the Catholic doctrine of predestination which is a fundamental concept in one of Messiaen’s favourite books, Dom Columba Marmion’s *Christ in his Mysteries (Le Christ dans ses Mystères)* [1919].<sup>37</sup> Given Messiaen’s avowed intention to achieve through music the ‘possibilities for giving

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<sup>34</sup> In a BBC Radio 3 programme on Messiaen, broadcast on 16 January 1999, George Benjamin stated that Messiaen seemed to have a different metabolic rate to the world around him ‘... 15 minutes seemed like 4 hours.’

<sup>35</sup> Op. Cit., Rössler, 92.

<sup>36</sup> Op. Cit., Samuel, 200.

<sup>37</sup> This is the central book of three; the first being *Le Christ vie de l’âme* (1917), and the third: *Le Christ idéal du moine* (1922).

expression to everything super-terrestrial, everything that's supernatural', it is easy to understand his predisposition to Marmion's writings.<sup>38</sup> In the preface to the 1<sup>st</sup> edition of his book, Marmion writes:

The Christian life is essentially supernatural, and can only be found in Christ, the supreme Model of perfection, the infinite Treasure of grace and the efficient Cause of all holiness (.) ... The life of Christ, the divine and at the same time the accessible Exemplar of the Christian life, is manifested to us by the states and mysteries, the virtues and actions of Sacred Humanity. Human in its outward expression, the life of the Word Incarnate is altogether divine in its origin(.) ... By His almighty virtue, Christ Jesus, ever living, produces the inward and supernatural perfection of His states in those who are moved by the desire of imitating Him and placing themselves in contact with Him by faith and love.<sup>39</sup>

Marmion's rhetoric is uncompromising and searing in its intensity: our *raison d'être* is to imitate Christ and bring to fruition his graces in us. Like Marmion, Messiaen's faith was one of certainty; a knowledge of, rather than a belief in, the reality of the incarnation of God made human. When Claude Samuel suggests to Messiaen that the story of Elizabeth's child (John the Baptist) who shifts position, genuflects and is baptised in the womb, is only symbolic, Messiaen indignantly replies: 'No, it's not a question of symbolism. The child really moved. It's a unique case, but he was truly baptised in his mother's womb'.<sup>40</sup> Such faith closes the distance between symbolism

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<sup>38</sup> Op. Cit., Rössler, 54.

<sup>39</sup> Marmion, Dom Columba, *Christ in His Mysteries*, trans. Mother M. St Thomas (London: Sands, 1924), xv. Unless otherwise stated, all references used in this chapter are to this translation. The use of capitals follows this translation.

<sup>40</sup> Op. Cit., Samuel, 14. For Messiaen, this example was evidently an important intellectual precedent to his understanding of his own inter-uterine maternal contact.

and reality. As in surrealist aesthetics (discussed in Chapter 4) the irreal is more real than the real. Marmion exhorts us to make a similar leap of faith because:

He [Christ] has come to be our Model. It is not only to announce salvation to us and to work out in principle our redemption that the Word became Incarnate; it is also to be the ideal of our souls. Christ Jesus is God living in our midst: God appearing amongst us [here is one origin of Messiaen's organ piece *Dieu parmi nous*], rendered visible and tangible, and showing us by His life as well as by His words the way of Holiness. We have no need to seek elsewhere than in Him for the model of perfection. Each of His mysteries is a revelation of His virtues. The humility of the manger, the labours and self-effacement of His hidden life, the zeal of the public life, the debts of His immolation, the glory of His triumph, are virtues which we ought to imitate, sentiments we ought to share, or states in which we ought to participate. At the Last Supper, after having washed the feet of His Apostles, thus giving to the Twelve an example of humility, Christ their Lord and master said to them: 'I have given you an example, that as I have done to you, so you do also.' He might have said the same of all that He did.<sup>41</sup>

If this tract appears slightly repetitious it is meant to be so. Marmion returns to the same imperative, recontextualising his message that we must follow Christ who is already omnipresent in our true nature; a reflection of God's perfection. Our inadequacy and rejection of Christ's way is a frequent hobby-horse of his book that, in its distinct way, forms part of the larger aesthetic world view of decline that not only motivated the Catholic revival in France, but the reassessment and renewal of art through the revolutionary spirit of modernism.

Although Marmion's call is a return to the traditional teachings of the church, there is nothing particularly conservative about the emotive quality of Marmion's

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<sup>41</sup> Op. Cit., Marmion, 12.

vision. The propagation of divine revelation to and through the human mind advocated in different ways by Marmion and Bergson must have been music to Messiaen's ears. If his music continually exhorts us to 'drink at the same source of light and joy that he sang all of his life', then his litaneous *œuvre* owes an epistemological and ontological debt to Marmion's rapturous rhetoric.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, Marmion's exultant tone carries in it the implicit patriarchal voice of authority, reflected in Messiaen's own certainty to which the Catholic church, in the late twentieth century, is struggling to hang on.<sup>43</sup>

Yet, in early twentieth-century France, the church had its own problems in the form of Père Alfred Loisy's Catholic modernist movement's emphasis on the reformation of the church's teaching. Immutable truths and dogma were to be questioned along with the notion that revelation and Christ's presence were a subjective matter for the consciousness of the believer, rather than supernatural gifts of grace. It is easy to imagine that such flagrant undermining of authority would have enraged the authorities and, in September 1907, Pope Pius X condemned the modernists in the encyclical *Pascendi dominici gregis*. Together with the spectre of Bergsonism, one can see Marmion's writings both as a reassertion and, with his emphasis on revelation, a re-evaluation of traditional Catholicism. The status of *Christ in His Mysteries* is self-consciously underlined in his book by a papal stamp of approval. Before the preface, a letter from Pope Benedict XV to Marmion congratulates him and gives the Apostolic Benediction on the work's

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<sup>42</sup> Taken from the card sent to friends and relatives by Yvonne Loriod-Messiaen after the death of the composer on 27 April 1992.

<sup>43</sup> Witness for example the ongoing debates on abortion, contraception, papal infallibility and the discussions with the Church of England about possible reconciliation.

‘praiseworthiness as being singularly conducive to excite and maintain the flame of divine love within the soul’.<sup>44</sup>

For the young Olivier Messiaen, it seems the choice was clear. Catholicism required the infusion of all aspects of the sacred life of Christ into one's own life and work, a cross that he believed he was predestined to carry from the womb: ‘It was my mother who pointed me, before I was born, toward nature and art. She did it in poetic terms; being a composer, I translated them later into music.’<sup>45</sup> Going further, for Marmion/Messiaen, such predestination is from eternity:

The life, death and glory of Jesus are the example of our life, death and glory. Never forget this truth: the Eternal Father accepts us only in as much as He sees in us a resemblance to his son. Why is this? Because it is to this very resemblance that, from all eternity, He predestined us [Marmion cites St Paul's letter to the Romans 8:29]. There is no other form of holiness than that which Christ showed to us; the measure of how perfection is fixed by the degree of our imitation of Jesus.<sup>46</sup>

Marmion makes the link here between predestination and eternity. So it becomes important for Messiaen to speak of eternity and the presence of Christ through a music that is intimately concerned with time. Time is the means of achieving the realisation of our predestination, of making humanity aware of the love of the resurrected Christ within themselves.

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<sup>44</sup> Op. Cit., Marmion, x, ‘Given at St. Peter's, Rome, October 10<sup>th</sup>, 1919, in the sixth year of Our Pontificate.’

<sup>45</sup> Op. Cit., Samuel, 15.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 13. Romans 8:29: ‘For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestine to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren.’ (King James version).

Messiaen's music attempts to communicate this because of his own private spiritual certainty. For instance, he believed himself predestined to be a musician. In 1978 Messiaen stated that 'Cécile Sauvage (1883-1927) [his mother] said "I suffer from an unknown music." It is from that that I found my belief in Predestination.'<sup>47</sup> If we believe this as Messiaen did, from such a start he could hardly fail but to follow in the footsteps of artists down the ages, re-enacting the 'mysteries' or events of Christ's life in his art. Not only did he create works for all the major church feasts of the year, a trajectory likewise followed in Marmion's book which begins with Advent and concludes with All Saints Day [*la Toussaint*], but many of his major works seem to have been influenced by Marmion's work: *L'Ascension*, *La Nativité du Seigneur* and the *Poèmes pour Mi* of the 1930s, and beyond this to the *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus* (1944), *Trois Petites Liturgies de la Présence Divine* (1945) *Messe de la Pentecôte* (1950), *La Transfiguration de Notre-Seigneur Jésus-Christ* (1965-69), *St François d'Assise* (1975-1983), *Livre du Saint Sacrement* (1984) and *Eclairs sur l'Au-Delà* (1988-91).

Predestination is a major theme of Marmion's book, based on an ideal of love which 'explains all the mysteries of Jesus'.<sup>48</sup> According to Marmion, love, as the most obvious perfection of Jesus, brought about the incarnation: '... the manifestation of God, it is God revealing Himself to us through the Humanity of Jesus ... it is the manifestation of divine love to the world.'<sup>49</sup> He then links Christ to our adoptive filiation:

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<sup>47</sup> Interview with Messiaen by an unnamed interviewer in *Diapason* no. 234 (December 1978), 38. Sauvage's words are from a cycle of poems written while pregnant with Messiaen entitled *L'Âme en Bourgeon*.

<sup>48</sup> Op. Cit., Marmion, 424.

<sup>49</sup> Op. Cit., Marmion, 368.



... love caused Christ to be born in passible and weak flesh, inspired the obscurity of the hidden life, and nourished the zeal of the public life. If Jesus delivers Himself up to death for us, it is because He yields to the excess of a measureless love; if He rises again, it is for 'our justification'; if He ascends into heaven, it is to prepare a place for us in that abode of blessedness; he sends the Paraclete so as not to leave us orphans; He institutes the Sacrament of the Eucharist as a memorial of His love. All these mysteries have their source in love.<sup>50</sup>

Marmion therefore places love, as Christ had in his two commandments, at the spiritual heart of Christianity. It only remained for this concept to be put at the heart of 'a music which may touch upon all things without ceasing to touch upon God'.<sup>51</sup> Having commented on the mass in *Le Banquet Céleste*, Messiaen moved on in the 1930s to the Ascension of Christ, one of the most inspiring and colourful events in the liturgical year. *L'Ascension* is a meditation and celebration both of the soul's love, desire and longing to be with Christ and of Christ's filial love for humanity in leaving us to prepare a place in heaven. Messiaen often achieves a translation of Marmion's ideas in sometimes naïve and pictorial ways. In exploring this for the first time in the Messiaen literature, I hope to show that Messiaen uses 'the means' of musical modernism with a directness of expression 'to an end' that is seemingly incommensurate with modernism.

*L'Ascension* was first written for Orchestra (1932-33) and then later transcribed for the organ with a replacement third piece (1933-34). The cycle comprises four pieces, the outer two dealing with Christ's majesty and glorification in his Ascension, and the inner two dealing with earthly responses from the soul of a

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<sup>50</sup> Op. Cit., Marmion, 363.

<sup>51</sup> *TMLM*, 8.

believer, emphasising desire (to follow God into heaven) and the celebration of Christ's ascent (orchestra) and transcendent joy (organ). There is therefore an inward dialogue in the work based on the thread of filiation between Christ and humanity. The upward spiritual trajectory of the Ascension itself is enacted through four works in ascending major keys: E, F, F# (the orchestral work begins in F# but modulates) and G; the final work ending on the dominant (in 4-3 position) to express supreme worldly transcendence.

The title of chapter 16 of Marmion's book: 'And now, Father, glorify Thy Son', is taken from the gospel according to St John, and is used in the epigraph that accompanies the first piece of the cycle: *Majesté du Christ demandent sa gloire à son Père* (*Majesty of Christ demanding that his Father should glorify him*). Marmion, paraphrasing St John, writes:

Now that the mission of His sojourn here below is fully terminated, the hour has come for Him to re-ascend to His Father ... He is now about to taste in all their fullness the profound joys of a marvellous triumph: the Ascension into Heaven gloriously consummates the earthly life of Jesus.

Of all the feasts of Our Lord, I venture to say that in a certain sense, the Ascension is the greatest, because it is the supreme glorification of Christ Jesus. [The] Holy Church calls this Ascension 'admirable' and 'glorious' and throughout the Divine Office of this feast, she makes us hymn the magnificence of this mystery.<sup>52</sup>

*Majesty of Christ* invokes this mystery in a solemn melody for brass instruments (supported by some woodwind). 'This prayer first of all testifies to our faith in the mystery'; a wonder reflected in the bright timbre of the opening trumpet melody, a naïve symbol of the final resurrection of souls in the apocalypse, which carries the

melody forwards and upwards, like the ‘Sacred Humanity rising from the earth and ascending visibly towards the heavens’.<sup>53</sup> Its trajectory is only interrupted by brass chorales that, by employing shifting diatonic chords (especially a tritone apart), metaphorically express the onlooker’s awe and *bouleversement de l’âme*. These chorales, from down below as it were, gradually shift and grow in intensity and tessitura to match the trumpet’s melody, especially from b. 15, carrying the onlookers upward to be with Christ in his majesty. Thus the initial ‘tonic’ peroration at b. 18 seems to suggest potently that Christ’s glory is or at least will be ours also. One can see from this diagram that the two sequential ascents at b. 16-17 (marked by brackets) are raised and extended to three ascents at b. 19-20 (moving to  $a^2$  at the third repetition); sharp-side keys and the serendipity of the shift to D major in b. 20 suggesting the energy and wonder of Christ breaking through the stratosphere. Note how the ascent to the first tonic peroration at b. 17-18 (marked X on my diagram) is extended registrally at b. 21-22 through the tessitura of the previous ascent (b. 17) to provide a greater sense of the onlooker from below ( $d^2$  in b. 17 and  $b^1$  in b. 21) rising to join Christ in his E major moment of triumph at b. 22:

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<sup>52</sup> Op. Cit., Marmion, 302-303.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 303.

Ex. 77 *Majesté du Christ* b. 15-22 (voice-leading reduction)

Drawn in by apocalyptic timbres, the naïve but nevertheless impressive allusion to chorales, and the ineffable quality of the melody that flouts the strictures of the (humanly-created) compound metre by ties and rests, Messiaen's vision of the Ascension has a quasi trance-like phantasmagoria that entices the onlooker to gaze increasingly upward and bask in the diatonic irradiation of E major.<sup>54</sup> Marmion's continuation of Messiaen's epigraph: '(Father, glorify Thy Son, so that in His turn, Thy Son may glorify Thee) in manifesting to us Thy divine Being, Thy perfections, Thy will!<sup>55</sup> implies both our predestination to be with Christ and also that our path to this moment be based on love, obedience and the imitation of Christ. The gradual

<sup>54</sup> Brass instruments are frequently employed in Messiaen's music because of their reference to the 'seven trumpets of the apocalypse' in the book of *Revelation*. See for example the stratified and direct image of *Les sept Anges aux sept trompettes* in *Couleurs de la Cité Céleste* (1963) and the sixth movement of *Eclairs sur l'Au-Delà*, which bears this title.

<sup>55</sup> Op. Cit., Marmion, 308. On p. 303 Marmion quotes the collect for Ascension Day: 'Grant, we beseech Thee, Almighty God, that we who believe that Thy Only begotten Son, our Redeemer, this day ascended into heaven, may ourselves also dwell there in spirit.'

musical ascent implies, as in *Apparition de l'Église éternelle*, that the road will not be easy, but unlike that work, there is a much more positive and affirmative conclusion that intimates that the goal of joining Christ will be attained. Human frailty is only acknowledged in the brief chorales; moments to catch our bearings before the next part of the melodic ascent. Yet, if our redemption is to be achieved, we must not look down, but gaze upwards with an intense desire to participate as children of God in 'our inheritance in the kingdom of heaven', a desire that must remain unsatiated, even after the embers of the final brass chord have died away.<sup>56</sup>

Human desire and longing are the subjects of the second piece: *Alléluias sereins d'une âme qui désire le ciel* (Serene alleluias from a soul longing for heaven). The work is in refrain-couplets form: AB, A<sup>1</sup>B<sup>1</sup>, A<sup>2</sup>; an angular melodic refrain alternating with lyrical supplicative couplets.<sup>57</sup> The dynamic of the work is created through the increasing complexity of the B sections which necessitates more complex A sections. Thus the same melody in the A sections is intensified and reorchestrated as though symbolic of an increasing and unending desire.

Messiaen chooses to recognise his and our mortal *pauvreté* in the epigraph from the collect for the mass for Ascension: 'We beseech Thee, Almighty God, to let us live with you in heaven in spirit.' The dialectic of desire and the expectation of fulfilment, embodied in the refrain-couplet form, are likewise important to Marmion, whose rhetorical question: 'And as for ourselves, shall we not penetrate into the heavens? Are we to remain shut out from this sojourn of glory and beatitude? Have we not a part in the Ascension of Jesus?', is answered in the affirmative when he

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<sup>56</sup> For Messiaen, E major signified the colour red, hence my allusion to flames.

reiterates that we share in Christ's glory, through our baptism and adoptive filiation as children of God: 'His joys, His glory, His beatitude become ours'.<sup>57</sup> The love of God for his children is present in the promise of being with him as much as the love of humanity is present in their desire to be with God.

Through the prism of Messiaen's music, our longing for eternity, intimated in different ways in this piece, is objectified as a dialectic of distance, a wish that longs to be fulfilled. The opening theme, voiced at three different octaves, suggesting perhaps the multiple envoicement of humanity's desire, has an ethereal modal quality aided by Messiaen's destruction of any sense of controlling metre in the second half of the theme. The reduction of durations from quintuplets to semiquavers to triplets and quavers along with the use of ties and accents is designed to dissolve the mind's sense of temporal organisation, and to encourage an intimation of eternity. As at the end of *Le Banquet Céleste*, the aggrandissement of values effects a natural ritardando:

**Ex. 78 Alléluias sereins (opening)**



<sup>57</sup> Messiaen says that these couplets contain 'swirls of neume-like passages, as in plainsong, with embellishments of a pastoral character'. Liner notes for recording of *L'Ascension* by Naji Hakim on Jade CD: 74321 30297-2, 1995, 17.

<sup>58</sup> Op. Cit., Marmion, 309-310.

This melody's incantatory mien is supported by the continual return to the note F as a tonal axis and the absence of any tonic-dominant polarity.<sup>59</sup> Although the key signature implies F major, notes from the melodic and harmonic minor, the Lydian 4<sup>th</sup> and the use of sharp-side notation (i.e. D flat as C#) subtly support and yet undermine the tonal centre.<sup>60</sup>

In Messiaen's piece, quasi-*oiseau* filigrees in the ensuing couplet continue to play with the F tonality over a 6-4 chord. Throughout Messiaen's works this chord is almost always used as a metaphor for eternity as at the same time it implies a lack of resolution and rootlessness. It dominates both couplets and allows melodic lines and filigrees to wander unhindered above, deferring to and differing from the overriding F tonality. Indeed, in the central section, it is the attempt (by the use of mode 2/1) and subsequent failure to escape this pedal 6-4 from b. 40-50 that engenders the emotive highpoint of the work at b. 46, where a glimmer of hope that the 6-4 might be overcome is quickly dashed. The use of the 6-4 creates a sense of worldly detachment and an intimation of elevation that is essential to the work's poetics.<sup>61</sup> The ensuing

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<sup>59</sup> However, it could be argued that the melody uses the tritone (B natural) as a substitute 'dominant'.

<sup>60</sup> There are many examples in *TMLM* showing the derivation of passages in Messiaen from other composers, so it is tantalising to imagine where Messiaen may have found such an idea. I have already talked about the role of grace notes in Messiaen's music. Whereas it is difficult in ex. 78 to distinguish which notes might be appoggiaturas to which authentic version of the F mode, it is clearer in the opening of Chopin's *Étude* Op.25/2 where appoggiaturas (B, D# and F#) subtly characterise a melody that spins around the axis of c<sup>2</sup>. One only needs to imagine how dull this étude would be without these added appoggiaturas. For a more extended example of this sort of ornamentation see the last movement of Chopin's *Piano Sonata* No. 2 Op.35.

<sup>61</sup> The 6-4 chord with its topos of peace, consolation, reconciliation, stillness etc. recurs throughout Messiaen's works i.e. at the beginning of *Louange à l'immortalité de Jésus* (*Quatuor pour la fin du Temps*), *Amen de la Création* (*Visions de l'Amen*), *Regard du Père* [*thème de dieu*] from the *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus*, *Chant d'amour II* (*Turangelila-Symphonie*) through to *St François d'Assise*.

halo of trills, tremolandi and string harmonics that end the work, this time playing with the stability of a 'tonic' pedal, is suggestive of the play of light (found in Tournemire's *L'Orgue Mystique*) from the desired *au-delà*, carrying the voices of the initial melody onwards and upwards.<sup>62</sup>

Desire for reconciliation seems to find fulfilment in the next work of the cycle: *Transports de Joie d'une âme devant la gloire du Christ qui est la sienne* (*Outburst of joy from a soul before the Glory of Christ which is its own glory*). Its epigraph: 'Giving grace to God the Father, who has allowed us to partake in the heritage of the saints of light ... we are resurrected and given a seat in heaven, in Jesus Christ', reveals that, like his later oratorio *La Transfiguration*, this work is a celebration of light and filiation.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>62</sup> Of course, the amount of detail is much greater in the orchestral original. The textures are generally less transparent and even overworked in comparison. Yet the interplay of flutes, oboes, cor anglais and clarinets in the couplets is delightful and emphasises the brilliance of the quasi-*oiseau* figurations. In addition, the original has two bars between the second couplet and the last refrain that introduce the trill figure that connects the register of the two sections, a connection that may have been useful in the organ version. The final refrain is *ff* in the orchestral version, with a *fff* ending, but in the organ version, with its combination of undulating timbres, flute filigrees and piquant *mélodie principale*, the halo of trills dissolves into a final *pp* chord. A forthcoming new edition of this organ piece, edited by Olivier Latry (based on consultation lessons with Messiaen) contains many timbral revisions that change the sound of this piece considerably.

<sup>63</sup> The first half of *La Transfiguration* is concerned with light i.e. in II and VI Messiaen uses a quote from Solomon 7:26: 'He is the brightness of the eternal light, a mirror without fault, and the image of his goodness. Alleluia.' Together with the lightnings that light the world (III) and the bright cloud (XIII) which announces divine filiation, Messiaen links this to Aquinas: 'Adoption as sons of God is made through a certain likeness of image to the Son of God by nature ... Therefore, both in [Christ's] Baptism and in the Transfiguration it was fitting that the natural sonship of Christ be manifested by the testimony of the Father, because He alone perfectly knows that perfect generation, together with the son and the Holy Spirit.' (IX) (*Summa Theologica*, Question 45, Article 4, Conclusion) - n.b. the emphasis on 'perfection' exhorted by Marmion. In piece X, the Prayer for the Feast of the Transfiguration is quoted as signifying



Marmion describes filiation as the process in which the divine life of Christ (God made human) is communicated to us through the grace of baptism, so that we may be partakers of his divine life. Christ is to be the author of a divine generation, whereby we become the children of God [see *La Nativité* below].<sup>64</sup> This, of course, is part of our predestination, a reciprocity that is celebrated in this piece. For a Catholic like Messiaen, Christ's resurrection and ascension announce the promise of our own resurrection and ascension:

Christ Jesus takes our humanity up with Him to give it a place in His glory and beatitude. This is the great action of Jesus, the magnificent exploit of the Divine Giant: to re-open by His sufferings the gates of heaven to *fallen humanity*, and to transport it, in His train, into the splendours of heaven [my emphasis].<sup>65</sup>

Transportation, light and joy are intimated in Messiaen's vision by the improvisatory *vitesse* of the F# major organ piece, a key that signifies brilliance and light which, for Marmion/Messiaen, contrasts with our 'fallen humanity'. F# major is used to signify radiant inner and external joy (that has as its source the love of Christ) throughout Messiaen's works from the climax in the centre of *Le Banquet Céleste* (1928) to the 'dans la Paix ensoleillée du Divin Amour' section of *Combat de la Mort et de la Vie*

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'... our perfect adoption as sons by the voice that came down with a cloud of light, grant most graciously that you may make us fellow heirs of the King of Glory and allow us to have a share in that Glory. Alleluia, alleluia.' Filiation and predestination are an integral part of Marmion's discussion of the Transfiguration in *Christ in His Mysteries*, 229-47.

<sup>64</sup> Op. Cit., Marmion 121-122. See also pp. 309-10: 'Have we not a part in the Ascension of Jesus? Certainly we have;- but, as you know, it is through Christ that we enter into heaven. How does this come to pass? Through baptism which makes us children of God(.) ... and in consequence, says St. Paul, His heirs(.) ... this is why we share in all the treasures that Christ possesses: His joys, His glory, His beatitude, become ours'.

(*Les Corps Glorieux*) [1936], the *Jardin du sommeil d'amour* (*Turangalila-Symphonie*) [1946-8 rev. 1990] to *la Résurrection du Christ* (*Livre du Saint Sacrement*) [1984].<sup>66</sup> The opening manuals' fanfare contains a seminal rhythmic and melodic *idée* that is immediately responded to by another *idée* in the *profondeur* of the pedals at b. 2, a veritable *coup de foudre de l'âme*:<sup>67</sup>

Ex. 79 *Transports de Joie* (opening)

Throughout the piece, improvisatory flourishes, made almost too fast for human minds to comprehend any detail (especially in large buildings), provide an image of the 'speed of light' - an allegory in Messiaen's aesthetics for joy and incorporeal

<sup>65</sup> Op. Cit., Marmion, 311.

<sup>66</sup> The final section of *la Résurrection du Christ* (*Livre du Saint Sacrement*) [1984] which ends in F# Major is a close adaptation from the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> station of the Cross *Une femme pieuse essuie la face de Jésus* (*Jesus and Veronica*), b. 49-55 from Marcel Dupré's *Le Chemin de la Croix* (1931) based on the cycle of poems by Paul Claudel. This was a work known to and much admired by Messiaen. In an article entitled 'Hommage à Marcel Dupré, *Courrier Musicale de France*, no.35 (1971), p. 113, Messiaen cites the sublime and heartrending [*sublime et déchirant*] *Chemins de la Croix*'.

<sup>67</sup> This opening rhythmic idea is derived from the 'Un peu moins vif' section, four bars after fig. 8 in the corresponding orchestral piece. If one imagines a C# in the first chord of the organ piece it is possible also to derive the first six notes of the pedal *idée* (two per chord) from the three chords of the opening flourish.

agility that he believes we will have after death.<sup>68</sup> The pedal *idée* is one of the most important ideas in French twentieth-century organ music. The use of the two descending tritones (in fact tritones in general - particularly in pedal parts) has become a meretricious symbol of an intimation of the awesomeness and surreal nature of certain biblical events such as the resurrection of Christ and parousia.<sup>69</sup>

After the second appearance of the opening material, in this strophic structure which recontextualises material on a heightened level each time, the opening material returns, superimposed upon itself, perhaps implying the reciprocity of filiation:

**Ex. 80** *Transports de Joie* b. 44-5



<sup>68</sup> The organ cycle *Les Corps Glorieux* (1939) is a meditation on, and celebration of, this. In LWT Op. Cit., Messiaen attributes the quality of agility to the 'glorified bodies' or the resurrected dead. He states that after death 'I expect to be able to travel to the stars with no difficulty and with no equipment and straightaway at lightning speed' (p. 11). *Force et Agilité* (*Les Corps Glorieux*) is the piece that specifically describes this but *Transports de Joie* comes from the same musical stable.

<sup>69</sup> When Messiaen uses the tritone in the pedals so consistently in *Les deux murailles d'eau* (*Livre du Saint Sacrement*), it as though he is aware of the tritone's topos but is still using it tendentiously for its effect. Certainly by the time one hears it in Jacques Charpentier's ... *Il vient. Alleluia* ... (1992), the tritone has lost all sense of its original apocalyptic aura. See Robert Sholl, 'Qu'est-ce qu'il se passe?' *The Musical Times*, vol. 137 (December 1996), 37-41 for a discussion of this trope and the possibilities of more fruitful alternatives in the use of the tritone.

As the work nears its conclusion, the initial pedal *idée* is further accelerated. Messiaen uses time in a different way here. By compressing, dismembering and speeding up the *idée* (ex. 81) he strains the player's ability and confuses the listener's capability of hearing detail in the explosion of sound. This overwhelming 'fracas of the organ' precipitates the work's denouement (ex. 82): a triumphalist image of Christ's arrival into heaven and the glory of our own promised liberation from the earth and freedom from mortality:<sup>70</sup>

**Ex. 81** *Transports de Joie* b. 58 (A) and 63 (B)

**A**

**B**

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The concept of 'aura' is that used in Walter Benjamin's essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', *Illuminations*, Op. Cit., 211-44.

<sup>70</sup> I allude here to a line of Huysmans cited in Chapter 1. 'It is now altered and disjointed, vainly dominated by the fracas of the organ, and it sings that God will come! Op. Cit, Huysmans, 35-6.

Ex. 82 *Transports de Joie* b. 64-8

Celebration is likewise the focus of the orchestral *Alléluia sur la trompette, alléluia sur la cymbale*. Its epigraph, ‘The Saviour is gone up with the sound of the trumpet ... Nations, clap your hands; celebrate God with cries of elation’,<sup>71</sup> seems to echo Marmion’s spirit of *réjouissance*:

Yes, let us rejoice! Those who love Jesus experience a deep and intense joy in contemplating Him in the mystery of His Ascension, in thanking the Father having given such glory to His son, and in felicitating Jesus in having been the object of it. Let us rejoice yet again in that this triumph and this glorification of Jesus are likewise ours.<sup>72</sup>

*Allégresse* is imparted in this agitated Dukasian scherzo (ABA<sup>1</sup>CA<sup>2</sup>), from the opening trumpet fanfares. Together with insistent cymbal clashes and the ubiquitous and, for Messiaen, uncharacteristic syncopation, these convey the nations clapping their hands cited in the work’s epigraph. This somewhat naïve imagery engenders a sort of motoric ‘movie-music’, particularly in the homophonic paroxysms of the

<sup>71</sup> Messiaen states that this is from Psalm 46. In fact it consists of parts of v. 5 and 1 respectively of Psalm 47.

<sup>72</sup> Op. Cit., Marmion, 314.

climax and in the final section, which relies on a drum-like tactus progressing from once a bar (fig. 18) to twice a bar (fig. 20) to a ‘ramming-speed’ four times a bar (13 after fig. 20) that dissolves into the triangle trill and string tremolandi (2 after 22) which conclude the work.<sup>73</sup> If it is more energetic than energising, *Alléluia sur la trompette* attempts to convey something of the fervent love of the soul for Christ; a bacchanalian rejoicing that the glorification of Christ in the Ascension will one day be ours. Like the first piece (*Majesty of Christ*), there is a sense of absolute assurance for Messiaen/Marmion that the onlooker will join Christ. Yet one cannot help thinking that its uncharacteristic non-modal musical language may be calculated to reflect more on the glory of the onlookers than Christ. Yet this chromatic language in the third orchestral piece provides a greater contrast to the pieces either side of it than does the organ piece.

It is perhaps fair to speculate that Messiaen composed *Transports de joie* when he came to transcribe the orchestral score, not so much because the *Alléluia sur la trompette* could not be adapted to the organ, but because he himself may have recognised the weakness of this work in its comparative lack of rhythmic and harmonic subtlety. With hindsight, *Alléluia* can be seen as a transitional work, and it looks back to the musical world of *Le Tombeau resplendissant*, while *Transports de Joie* looks forward to *La Nativité*. Listeners are left in no doubt of the merits of *Transport de Joie*: it remains one of the most strikingly memorable and original of all Messiaen’s compositions.

From the organ’s radiance and the hedonist hurly-burly of the orchestra, we are transported in the final piece of *L’Ascension* to the ecstasy of *la vie intérieure*. In his fourth thesis, Marmion quotes part of the prayer of Christ ascending to his father,

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<sup>73</sup> ‘Ramming-speed’ is a reference to the film *Ben Hur*.

‘I ascend to My Father and to your Father, to My God and your God’, which informs the poetry and title of the fourth piece: *Prière du Christ montant vers son Père* (*Prayer of Christ ascending towards his Father*).<sup>74</sup> Messiaen also quotes from this prayer in the epigraph to his piece: ‘Father, ... I have manifested your name to men ... And now, I am no more in the world, but these are in the world, and I come to thee’.<sup>75</sup> In a note Messiaen confirms the notion of filiation in this piece: ‘... a long solemn phrase climbs slowly towards radiant eternity, marked with the tenderness and immense love of Christ for men that he has left the world’.<sup>76</sup> The luscious timbre of divided strings (with only 2 solo cellos and no double basses) and extreme slowness help intimate the Bergsonian *durée* and eternal love. Yet, this seems to be compromised as much as supported by the regularity of the quasi-cadential diatonic points of repose. Their respective tessituras, in each of the three strophes that form this piece, provide points of reference for the dialectical listening discussed above in Part I, while conveying the move upwards towards eternity and encouraging us to ‘fully participate in the glorious Ascension of Jesus’.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Op. Cit., Marmion, 315.

<sup>75</sup> Messiaen writes: ‘It is in the cenacle [the upper room in which the last supper was eaten] and in advance, that Christ declared these words, thus abolishing the idea of time and place. They were said again at the very moment of the Ascension, and summarize all the solemnity of this departure from the earth for an elevation which infinitely exceeds the celestial orders.’ Liner notes for recording of *L’Ascension* by Naji Hakim on Jade CD: 74321 30297-2, 1995, 18.

<sup>76</sup> Liner notes to Susan Landale’s recording of *Les Corps Glorieux* and *L’Ascension*, on ADDA: 581059 AD 184.

<sup>77</sup> Op. Cit., Marmion, 322. Most important is the effect of the 6-4 chord which suggests both contemplation and elevation, particularly in the final strophe, where the violin’s ascent to a<sup>3</sup> (in

Ex. 83 *Prière du Christ* (voice-leading reduction)

Like *Le Banquet Céleste*, this work is essentially in a plagal form of G major (reminiscent of the church modes), with the dominant as its *finalis*. As in the earlier piece, this work makes reference to its higher and lower dominants (V and IV). Like a rubber band that, when stretched to its furthest point has no energy and yet, at the same time, boundless potential energy (because it is being held still), the movement to the lower dominant (which appears as a middleground neighbour-note on my diagram of the 3 strophes) engenders a stability or energetic low-point that precipitates maximum propulsion (upwards as it were) to the upper dominant which carries the intimation of elevation and release. The effect of this is heightened by the fact that Messiaen only makes reference to the half-way house of G major (the 'tonic') in the form of a 6-4 chord. Together with the registral change upward (made more striking in the orchestral version which is an octave higher than the transcription for organ), Messiaen's use of the 6-4 chord facilitates his dramatic vision of eternal paradise from below.

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the orchestral version), traversing modes 2, 3 and 4 (see Chapter 1), is repeated and compressed 8 bars later.



The harmonic bonds between the two dominants (upper and lower) moving through the tonic provide a musical metaphor for the tendrils of love manifested in the concept of filiation between Christ who has ascended and the earthly onlookers. Right from the start at b. 2, Messiaen emphasises the upper dominant not only to keep the promise of participation in Christ's ascension alive (*pace* Marmion), but to transport us (as far as humanly possible) to an intimation of our own future ascension.

As is evident from my commentary, there is an amazing *rapprochement* between Marmion's thought and the music of Messiaen. Messiaen's illustrative discourse in texts and musical images effectively transfigures any residue of modernism in the multivalent modes, orchestral timbres, dissonant chords. Languid chorales, ties and rests that disrupt clock-bound time and 6-4 chords all attempt to speak of an alternative reality beyond the confines of worldly modernity even as it is invoked. *L'Ascension* therefore stands as an early monument to Messiaen's project of transforming the world through music.

### III

Like Michelangelo's cherubs in the Sistine Chapel that vacantly stare upward awaiting divine revelation, Messiaen's own iconography of ascension attempts to divert our gaze away from the gutter of *la vie quotidienne* to look at the stars. Such a project requires continual affirmation if 'fallen humanity' is to be redeemed.<sup>78</sup> Love is therefore set at the centre of Messiaen's next cycle of organ works, *La Nativité du Seigneur* (1935), which remains one of his most popular works. First performed in Paris at Sainte-Trinité on 27 February 1936 by Daniel-Lesur, Jean Langlais and Jean-

Jacques Gr  nwald, the enthusiasm of the press releases seems to indicate that this was the piece that launched Messiaen into public recognition.<sup>79</sup> Its accessibility for player and audience alike (it is approximately one hour long), and its variety and compositional transparency relate directly to Messiaen's fervent desire to convey emotion and sincerity 'transmitted to the listener by sure and clear means'.<sup>80</sup>

Messiaen here again expresses his search for certainty as a critical defence against modernist multiple meaning. Yet *La Nativit  * is not only more indebted to Marmion, but perhaps even more na  ve and pictorial in character. The form of the work can be compared to the tableaux in Mathias Gr  newald's Isenheim altar piece (1515), that Messiaen loved. Messiaen's meditation takes the form of a series of *r  gards* or overviews of characters, events and ideas.<sup>81</sup> Despite the work being a

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<sup>78</sup> Op. Cit., Marmion, 311.

<sup>79</sup> 'Extraits de presse', a propaganda leaflet published by Leduc, reveals glowing reviews of *La Nativit  * from distinguished musicians and commentators such as Georges Auric, Henri Sauguet, Bernard Gavoty, Daniel-Lesur, Jacques Ibert, and also *The Times* (11 December 1937). Messiaen performed two works in London (*Les Mages* and *Le Verbe*), at the invitation of Felix Aprahamian and the suggestion of Francis Poulenc, at the 1938 ISCM festival at the BBC Concert Hall (Broadcasting House) on 22 June 1938, and three days later he gave a complete performance at St Alban-the-Martyr, Holborn (on the 'Father' Willis organ that stood there before the church was bombed). *The Times*'s review in the Leduc brochure is of a concert given by Andr   Fleury on 9 December 1937 at the West London Synagogue, in which he played *Les Enfants de Dieu*, *Les Anges*, *Les Mages* and *Dieu parmi nous*. This was the first performance of any part of *La Nativit  * in England. Edwin Evans, in the *Liverpool Daily Post*, thought the work 'not very modern' and called Messiaen a 'tutoral (sic.) grandson' of C  sar Franck. This differs from the French reviews which were at pains to stress the originality of the work and its status as religious art.

<sup>80</sup> *Note de l'Auteur* in *La Nativit  *, book 1.

<sup>81</sup> This is an idea taken from Marmion's *Christ in his Mysteries* that Messiaen was to transform further in his *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-J  sus* (1944) which revisits some of the *Regards* of *La Nativit  *. *Vingt Regards* owes some of its literary influence to Maurice Toesca's *Les Douze Regards*. I am indebted to Edward Forman's paper, given on 22 June 2002 at the Messiaen conference in Sheffield, for this information.

cycle, it moves freely from one idea or personage to another in a way that prefigures the mosaic-like structuring of *Couleurs de la Cité Céleste* (1963).

In the *Note de l'Auteur* of this work, Messiaen cites five principal theological ideas, the foremost of which is: 'Our predestination realised through the incarnation of the word.' This relates directly to the epigraph for the third piece 'God, in his love, predestined us to be his adoptive sons, through Jesus Christ, by the praise and glory of his Grace.'<sup>82</sup> The title of the work, *Desseins éternels* [Eternal designs], along with the title of the ninth piece *Dieu parmi nous* [God among us], derives directly from Marmion's *Table des Matières*. Summarising the opening of his sixth chapter, he writes:

**Dessein éternel** de Dieu: envoyer son Fils en ce monde pour racheter la race humaine; durant des milliers d'années, **Dieu** prépare l'humanité à la venue de son Fils **parmi nous**; pourquoi une si longue période? Afin que les hommes reconnaissent leur besoin d'un Rédempteur; la grandeur du mystère de l'Incarnation et la majesté du Sauveur réclament aussi cette préparation [my emphases].<sup>83</sup>

I give this example in the original French to highlight the relation between Marmion's text and the titles of Messiaen's pieces (in bold). In this summary Marmion again confronts us with our recognisance and need (as 'fallen humanity') for a long-awaited redeemer - an almost meretricious trope of his book and Messiaen's music.

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<sup>82</sup> Epistle of St Paul to the Ephesians 1:5-6.

<sup>83</sup> Dom Columba Marmion, *Le Christ dans ses Mystères* (Les Éditions de Maredsous, 1947), 464. 'God's eternal design: to send His son into this world to redeem the human race; during thousands of years, God prepares the human race for the coming of His Son amongst us; why such a long period? In order that men should recognise their need of a redeemer, the greatness of the mystery of the Incarnation and the majesty of the Saviour ...'. Op. Cit., *Christ in His Mysteries*, 414-15.

Marmion's first words in this chapter also reveal the title of the fifth piece, *Les Enfants de Dieu*:

All God's blessings that come down upon us have their source in the election that He made of our souls, throughout eternity, to make them "holy and unspotted in His sight". In this divine decree so full of love is contained adoptive predestination as **children of God** [my emphasis] and all the favours thereto attached.

St. Paul says that it was through the grace of Jesus Christ, sent by God in the fullness of time, that this adoption was granted to us: [Marmion cites part of St. Paul's letter to the Galatians 4:4-5].

God's **eternal design** [*dessein éternel*] of sending His own son into the world to redeem the human race, broken and bruised by sin, and of restoring the children's inheritance and heavenly beatitude, this is the masterpiece of His wisdom and love.<sup>84</sup>

For Marmion/Messiaen, we are redeemed through eternal love, manifested in the incarnation and the grace of baptism which make us children of God. This love is eulogised in the third piece by an extremely long unbroken melody consisting of 8 bars, expanded by registral expansion and sequential patterns to 12 bars, with a coda of 7 [1+2+4 or 2+2+3 bars] bars.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Op. Cit., Marmion, 95. St. Paul's letter to the Galatians 4:4-5: 'But when the fullness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons.'

<sup>85</sup> This work is derived from the final part of *Les Offrandes oubliées*, scored for divisi strings, which comments on the text 'Here is the pure table, the source of charity, the banquet of the

**Ex. 84** *Desseins Éternels* (r.h. melody)

**Extrêmement lent et tendre**

P: quintaton 16 cor de nuit S

Several aspects of this piece contribute to this work's poetic intimation of eternity and love. The extreme *lenteur* of the modal melody is accompanied by added-note chords: altered 6-3, 6-4, seventh and ninth chords, and the French sixth, that suspend and yet intimate tonal progressions. Messiaen's use of ties to diffuse the sense of metre relates directly to one of his favourite works, Debussy's *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, where ties and irrational values, in the opening solo flute melody, create a plainchantesque fluidity that must have caught his ear.<sup>86</sup>

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poor, behold the adorable Pitied one offering the bread of life and love. We love you, sweet Jesus, we have not forgotten you.'

<sup>86</sup> See Op. Cit., LWT, 13-14, in which George Benjamin discusses Messiaen's conservatoire-class analysis of this piece. Messiaen states 'Debussy's music is like water. Water is still, unmoving, but if you throw a pebble in, there is an immediate shock wave around the pebble and the water

**Ex. 86** *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* (opening)



If Messiaen's melody creates a similar floating 'static' atmosphere, it is because these ties, and the extreme slowness, act to disguise the developmental processes of sequence and repetition.<sup>87</sup> Languor is intimated throughout *Desseins éternels* by the overlapping of phrases, the employment of emotive rising and falling sixths, laden with topoi of transcendence and grief respectively from the tonal repertoire, and heightened by the lugubrious sonority of the accompanying chords on a rich mixture of 8 and 16 ft stops. The descent of the melodic line from b. 13 is complemented by the pedals which embark on a descent form (written) c<sup>1</sup># in the 16 ft register to (written) G# in the 32 ft register; their increasingly unfathomable deep timbre suggesting *par excellence* the profundity of eternity and the depth of God's love for humanity. Time, and Messiaen's treatment of it in this work, is the crucible of God's loving *Eternal designs*.

Marmion's emphasis on the redemptive nature of this love is taken up by Messiaen in the 7th piece, *Jésus accepte la souffrance*, which looks forward to the

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starts moving. And Debussy's music is like that - there are pauses and then all of a sudden it moves. It was that pause which struck me.'

<sup>87</sup> This is also a performance problem. Some players chose to attempt to make the rhetoric of Messiaen's phrases clear by a faster initial tempo but, in fact, this rhetoric can be clarified at the slow tempo by subtle use of rubato. See my comparison of Messiaen's performances with the Jade CD set of 1995 in 'The True Way', *The Musical Times*, vol. 137 (May 1996), 35-7.

crucifixion (the act of redemption) and subsequent resurrection.<sup>88</sup> The weight of the cross is tangible throughout in the work's near-stultified brevity and suffocating *angst*. Messiaen attempts to depict graphically Christ's self-abasement and redemptive sacrifice, intimated in the scriptural epigraph printed above the music.<sup>89</sup>

The opening chord of the work is a shock reminder that Christ's entry into the world was not triumphant but humble and that he was born to die, a teleology made immediately clear in an exposé of the cross motive in the pedals (X):<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> In a programme note for his performance of *La Nativité* at St. Mark's church, North Audley St in London on 20 December 1945, Messiaen writes: 'Three ideas are expressed: the first represents divine justice falling both on the sin and the Son [cross motive], the second represents the lowly reply of the Son in his mother's womb, the third represents the sufferings of the Passion [dissonant three-note chords building to a climax]. In the last bars the acceptance of the divine victim rises to the skies [one of the most radiant conclusions Messiaen wrote - ending in C# major]'. In a later note for Jennifer Bate's recording (Jade CD: 74321 29890-2) [trans. Jon Gillock], he states that the epigraph for this piece '... reveals to us the first movement of the soul of Jesus at the moment of the Incarnation. In this solemn instant, he accepts the Cross, ...' at the end of the piece, the phrase of acceptance on the full organ: "Lo, I come".'

<sup>89</sup> Here is the text in full: 'Wherefore when he cometh into the world, he saith, Sacrifice and offering thou wouldst not, but a body hast thou prepared me: in burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin thou hast had no pleasure. Then said I, Lo I come (in the volume of the book it is written of me) to do thy will, O God.' St Paul's letter to the Hebrews 10:5-7. This partly paraphrases Psalm 40:6-8. In describing Christ's self-abasement, Marmion quotes St Paul's letter to the Philippians 2:6-11. 'Who being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God; but emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men, and in habit found as a man. He humbled Himself, becoming obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. For which God also hath exalted Him, and hath given him a name which is above all names. That in the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those that are in heaven, on earth and under the earth; and that every tongue should confess that the Lord Jesus Christ is in the Glory of God the Father.' Op. Cit., Marmion, 65.

<sup>90</sup> Messiaen shows in *TMLM* how he derives this motive from the opening of *Boris Godunov* but, as a pupil of Dupré, he almost certainly must have been aware of its significance in Bach's music where, at the end of *O Mensch, bewein dein Sünde groß* BWV 622, Bach uses a (similarly shaped) *nota-cambiata* motive to depict the Cross in the text of the chorale. This opening statement is alternated with the following 'Douloureux, presque vif' sections which

**Ex. 87** *Jésus accepte la souffrance* (opening)

**Très lent**

R: trompette  
P: salicional,  
unda maris  
G: Fonds 16,  
8, 4

Péd: basson  
16 seul

The central ‘douloureux et vif’ section employs ‘mixture’ stops at the bottom of the keyboard (where one can almost hear their respective components sticking out like bones from Christ’s emaciated flesh) to intimate the agony of Christ at the crucifixion. A five-fold phrase expansion, to naïvely symbolise Christ’s five wounds, then uses the idea of the progressive increase and decrease of intervals where the distance between the bottom and top voice of each chord increases over the course of each phrase. The ending of the piece expands and gradually transfigures the cross motive, reminding us that ‘Christ the sacerdotal character is transcendent’.<sup>91</sup> The cross motive (X) undergoes registral expansion and a gradual ritardando, expanding into the eternity of luminous chords through which Messiaen/Marmion intimate that ‘the Whole life of Our Lord was ordered in view of His Sacrifice upon Calvary; and marked with the seal of the cross’.<sup>92</sup>

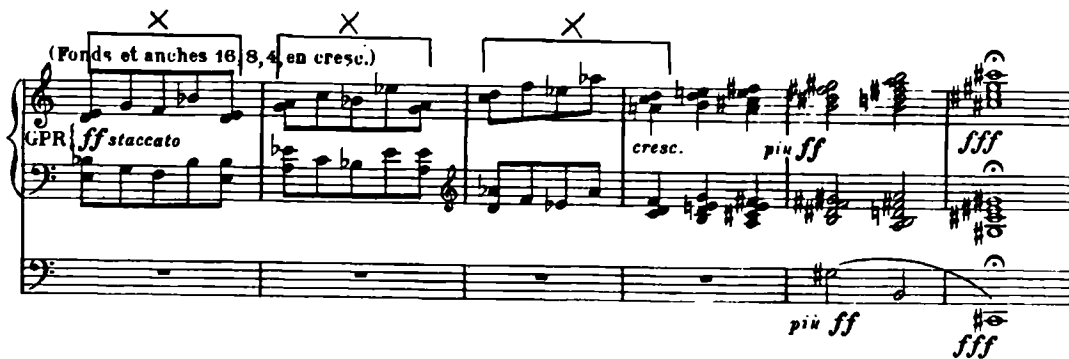
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seem to express the Father’s grief at the loss of his son to the world. Polytonality (with touches of the whole-tone scale) merges in b. 4 and 10 in each section respectively with modes 3/4 and 3/1 to portray this sad and wondrous vision of Christ in the crib.

<sup>91</sup> Op. Cit., Marmion, 414.

<sup>92</sup> Op. Cit., Marmion, 414.



Ex. 88 *Jésus accepte la souffrance* (end)

In ex. 88, Messiaen/Marmion remind us that Christ's sacrifice for us is glorious and that we are predestined to share one day in this glory through our own resurrection. The gradual trajectory of the piece, through pain and polytonality to the glories of C# major presents a profound allegory of Messiaen's transfiguration of modernity.

The love of God that would gladly sacrifice his son for humanity is celebrated through the idea of filiation in pieces 4 and 5.<sup>93</sup> Marmion speaks of God giving us a share of his divinity:

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<sup>93</sup> The most interesting section of *Le Verbe* (The Word) is the final section - a long *choral orné* mixing mode 2 with major and minor chords that seems to voice our interior joy when the third mass of Christmas '... will be in honour of Christ's coming into our souls' (Marmion, 118). As in the *Prière du Christ* (*L'Ascension*), the incantatory mien of this melody has a propensity to cadence at the end of every bar, like sections of a plainchant sequence or gradual. A notable feature of this long section is the way in which the chords underneath this melody seem to anticipate the movement and even conflict with the notation of the melody, leading to a sort of minute rhythmic 'bump'. This can be seen in the way the 5<sup>th</sup> note of b. 3 (r.h.) is an appoggiatura dissonance to the underlying harmony.

These jolts serve both momentarily to destabilise the incandescent flow of the melody, but also to give it a certain interest. Messiaen's mélange of mode 2 and ordinary diatonic chords, along with the way some of the melismas become longer in the latter parts of the piece, is particularly beautiful. The quasi-hypnotic effect is only brought to a close by the sudden introduction of longer values in the final bar, and the sense of 'arrival', after a long journey, on a mixolydian cadence: an internal realisation that Christ has been made appreciable to the soul; a

In making us share in His condition of Son, He will make us **children of God** [This is title of Messiaen's fifth piece]. 'When the fullness of time was come, God sent His Son, made of a woman, ... that we might receive the adoption of sons.'<sup>94</sup>

According to Aquinas and Marmion, through baptism, Christ enters our souls and we become children of God. The joy and excitement of this 'becoming' in *Les Enfants de Dieu* is created by a long crescendo in which a 6-4 chord (with an added 6<sup>th</sup>, and again expressing the topos of eternity) functions as a localised appoggiatura to F#<sup>7</sup> (b. 2). As in *Le Banquet Céleste*, the first part of this work is predicated on a plagal version of B major (F#-F#). So F#<sup>7</sup> is 'prolonged' and propelled, like a spring being wound up, using mode 2, through flat-side notation (b. 12) and an octave-register transfer to F#<sup>7</sup> (b. 17). F# is then further prolonged via figurations in mode 2/3 towards a chorale-like statement on the organ's fortissimo that, as in *Prière du Christ (L'Ascension)*, moves to the lower dominant (IV).

This ensuing tutti outburst 'lets the spring go' and, in my interpretation, as in *Le Banquet Céleste*, this seems naïvely to voice the second portion of Messiaen's epigraph.<sup>95</sup>

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moment of awareness that awakens the listener from the dream-like music in preparation for the ensuing quickening of piece no. 5.

<sup>94</sup> Op. Cit., Marmion, 121. The biblical quote is from St Paul's letter to the Galatians 4:4-5.

<sup>95</sup> St Paul's letter to the Galatians 4:6. 'And God hath sent forth the spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father.'

Ex. 89 *Les Enfants de Dieu* b.27-38

Et Dieu a en-vo-y-é dans leur cœur l'Es-prit de  
 vir  
 fff  
 son Fil, le-quel cri-(e) : Pè-re! Pè-re!  
 rall.  
 f dim. molto  
 (+ montre 18 G)

As in *Desseins éternels*, eternity is depicted through extreme langour in the final section of the piece that (like the first part of the piece) explores the ways in which the first chord in the l.h. (b. 39) can function as an appoggiatura to the 'tonic' (B).<sup>96</sup> As at the end of *Jésus accepte la souffrance*, a gradual rallentando slows the metabolic rate of the work, depicting 'the tender call of children to their Heavenly Father'.<sup>97</sup> Time

<sup>96</sup> This acts like therapeutic reassurance to the 'compatiente's' soul that Christ is to remain appreciable in his soul. Only here can it be understood that the movement from the 'higher dominant' (V) in the first section to the 'lower dominant' (IV) at the climax and finally to the tonic, creates the dynamic of this piece and gives this final section its sense of calm elevation.

<sup>97</sup> Messiaen's programme note for 20 December 1945 describes *Les Enfants de Dieu* thus: 'a joyful fanfare representing spiritual birth is followed by a sad but confident lull evoking the tender call of children to their Heavenly Father'. As in the first section, the alternation of sharp/flat side notation in the final section ensures colourist change and a sense of spiritual progression, particularly at the affective shift to an A flat major chord (four bars from the end),

slows at the end of the work until we arrive in eternity on the final B major chord (with added 6<sup>th</sup>), its profundity, as at the end of *Le Banquet Céleste*, underlined by the addition of the pedal *soubasse* 32. Filiation, as the means by which humanity is called back to eternal God, is here presented in a language steeped in decadence and eroticism, again revealing Messiaen's transformation of modernity.

Colouring the central ideas of filiation, predestination and the love of God in Messiaen's cycle are a 'Description of several personages giving to the feast of Christmas a particular poetry: The angels, The Wise Men and the Shepherds [*les Anges, les Mages, les Bergers*]' which are presented in the 6<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> pieces respectively.<sup>98</sup> Speaking of the three masses of Christmas, mentioned above in relation to *Le Verbe*, Marmion says that

These feasts are magnificent, they are likewise full of charm. The Church evokes the remembrance of the Angels singing in the sky the glory of the new-born Babe; of the Shepherds who come to adore at the manger; of the Magi who hasten from the East to offer Him their adorations and rich presents.<sup>99</sup>

Quasi-baroque *Affektenlehre* is used to evoke these presences. Continual semiquavers imitate the beating of the angels' wings in *Les Anges*.<sup>100</sup> The trudging of the Magi and the rocking of their caravans as they go towards the Christ-child is intimated by

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still prolonging B major, which seems to announce a recognisance of acceptance and reconciliation before the music ineluctably settles (into the soul) on the 'tonic'.

<sup>98</sup> *Note de l'Auteur to La Nativité*, book 1.

<sup>99</sup> Op. Cit., Marmion, 115.

<sup>100</sup> See Bach's organ chorale prelude *Von Himmel kam der Engel Schar* BWV 607. As an organ student of Marcel Dupré, a Bach devotee, Messiaen would have almost certainly known this piece. In his programme note for 20 December 1945, Messiaen calls *Les Anges* a 'sort of paradisiacal dance. The exultation of disembodied spirits'.

plodding chords in *Les Mages*,<sup>101</sup> while *Les Bergers*<sup>102</sup> are invoked by calling of flutes, as though from different hills, and the pifa-like alternation of oboes and shawms: albeit with Messiaen's innovatory revival of the idea of brightening reed timbres with quiet mutation stops.<sup>103</sup>

Messiaen's final theological idea, and the inspiration for the cycle, is transmitted in the first piece, *La Vierge et l'Enfant 'pour honorer la maternité de la Sainte Vierge'*.<sup>104</sup> The shifting modal sands (modes 2 and 3) in this first section, essentially elaborating first and, more poignantly, second inversion chords with their topos of eternity, together with the eerie iridescent composite timbre of flute 4, nazard 2<sup>2/3</sup> and the hollow quintaton 16, an innovatory sound because of its lack of 8ft timbres which seems to suggest the surreal inter-uterine 'mystery of the Annunciation to the Virgin, the exchange between the Divinity and Humanity is concluded; the

<sup>101</sup> Chapter VIII of *Marmion* Op. Cit., 'The Epiphany', is devoted to the wise men.

<sup>102</sup> Op. Cit., programme note 20 December 1945, 'First, the holy light about the manger. A few flute notes are heard and the shepherds withdraw, piping a sort of carol with a curious rhythm.' For the recording by Jennifer Bate (Jade CD: 74321 29890-2) Messiaen states that these melodies are '... in the style of popular Noël's of the French countryside'. They use the Greek feet '*Bacchius* [short, long, long], *Amphimacer* [long, short, long], 2<sup>nd</sup> *Epitrite* [long, short, long, long], and *Dochmius* rhythm [short, long, long, short, long]'.  
<sup>103</sup> The idea for this derives from the technique of adding mutations to reed stops used by such French composers such as François Couperin; see his 5<sup>e</sup> couplet from the Kyrie section of the *Messe à l'usage des paroisses* (1690): *trio à deux dessus de chromhone et la basse de tierce*. Tournemire uses the mixture of a reed and a mutation stop in the *Elévation* of *L'Orgue Mystique* no. 5 (*Circumcisio Domini*), where he writes for the combination of gambe 8 and nazard 2<sup>2/3</sup> (solo in the pedals). In the *Elévation* of No. 7 (*L'Épiphanie*), he asks for the hautbois 8, gambe 8 and nazard 2<sup>2/3</sup> (in both hands), while in the *Communion* of no. 10 (*III<sup>e</sup> Dimanche après L'Épiphanie*), he uses the timbres of the hautbois 8 and nazard 2<sup>2/3</sup> in chords (r.h.) in b. 10-15. In the *Offertoire* of no. 38 (*VII<sup>e</sup> Dimanche après la Pentecôte*) he asks for the rich combination of montre 16, bourdon 16, basson 8 (reed), gambes 8 and nazard 2<sup>2/3</sup> (in both hands).

<sup>104</sup> *Note de L'Auteur* in *La Nativité*, book 1.

Divine Maternity'.<sup>105</sup> The following section, in which her soul is *transportée d'allégresse* is summoned up in the sweeping melodic line and recontextualisation of Messiaen's variant of the plainchant introit for Christmas day *Puer natus est nobis*. The shuffling of *personnages rythmiques*, and the use of ties and irrational values (septuplets) underline Messiaen's synthesis of traditional and non-traditional structuring of musical time, while the shifting tonal foci (discussed in Part III of Chapter 2) along with the modes engender a multivalent modernist discourse that Messiaen attempts to subsume through his religious aesthetics.<sup>106</sup>

In the final piece of the cycle (*Dieu parmi nous*), the three main themes announced at the opening: the fall of God to earth and the profundity of his incarnation b. 1-3 [*chute du Christ*], the love of God b. 4-7 [*thème d'amour*] and the *style-oiseau* joy of the Christian soul upon receiving this love b. 8 [*thème d'allégresse*] are expanded in reverse order through recontextualisation.<sup>107</sup> Bars 16-30 expand the *thème d'allégresse*, b. 31-54 develop the *thème d'amour* through a new

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<sup>105</sup> Op. Cit., Marmion, 152. Paul Éluard and André Breton speak of 'La vie inter-utérine' in their book *L'immaculée conception* in Paul Éluard, *Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), 308-310.

<sup>106</sup> The final section recapitulates the opening music and celebrates the presence of Christ: 'Voici que ton roi vient à toi, juste et humble'. Marmion's belief that 'Christ, the new Adam, redeems us, brings us back to God, by the humility of His Incarnation', is a repeated trope of his book (Marmion, 127). For him, if we were to realise the full scope of this, we would overcome our pride: 'Our refusal to obey' (Marmion, 128). A solitary flute timbre sings of both Christ's humility and of the beginning of his lonely mission in the world, the concluding 'embellishment group' signifying perhaps the vicissitudes of his life to be, and the final seventh chord (in 4-2 position), the mystery and expectancy of that life. Messiaen describes the 'Embellishment Group' in *TMLM*, 56. The A flat at the bottom of this chord is often difficult to hear because of the way flute stops are voiced i.e. getting brighter as they ascend, so that the ear vacillates between hearing a 4-2 chord and a root-position chord.

motorised texture, phrase extension and transposition only to return to the opening motive (b. 55) which continues the notion of reversal inherent in the work's formal layout.

This '*Chute du Christ*' motive is inverted with an *accelerando* in b. 57, a change that precipitates a transfiguration of the initial falling motive with its association of God's loss into a toccata celebration of our human reconciliation with Christ on earth.<sup>108</sup> Once the toccata gets going, the first half of the piece may seem almost like an insignificant preamble leaving all struggles behind in its jubilation.<sup>109</sup>

The last six bars of the work form a monumental coda insistently repeating a variation of the first four notes of the piece.<sup>110</sup> Realisation of this brings an awareness of the spiritual distance covered from the opening. Once again a gradual *ritardando* leads to the final E major chord (with an added 6<sup>th</sup>) which signifies not only our recognisance of the 'Redeemer, the greatness of the mystery of the Incarnation and the majesty of the Saviour', but that humanity and modernity have made a reconnection to the divine and eternal.<sup>111</sup>

Messiaen's desire to express the birth of Christ in music is strikingly audacious for a young composer of 27 years old. Even more striking is his realisation

<sup>107</sup> It is possible that the '*Chute du Christ*' idea was unconsciously inspired by a melodic idea in Berlioz' *La Damnation de Faust*, Scene XII, which uses all the notes of mode 4/1. See *TRCO*, Vol. VII, 127.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., (North Audley St. notes), 'At its return, the first theme, now representing the Incarnation, bursts like a clap of thunder.' The *accelerando* in b. 57 will appear eventually in the new edition of Messiaen's organ works ed. Olivier Latry.

<sup>109</sup> The repetition of the toccata material, after a unison section once again recontextualising the *thème d'allègresse*, is formally and emotionally necessary. It lends weight to the transfiguration of the first theme, and even though slightly abridged in its second appearance, it ensures that the cycle concludes in exultant mode with the spirit glorifying the saviour.

<sup>110</sup> i.e. d<sup>3</sup>#, d<sup>3</sup>, c<sup>3</sup>, b<sup>2</sup> in b. 1 become G#, G, F and E in the last two bars.

of the potential of the organ. Only in the music of Jehan Alain, a fellow composer known to Messiaen, and in André Jolivet's *Prélude Apocalyptique* (1935) had the envelope of post-Franckian organ music been broken.<sup>112</sup> Indeed Jolivet is the only major French composer of the twentieth century, despite the title of that first major piece, who has been able to shake off Messiaen's religio-aesthetic yoke and forge an unqualified modernist organ music.<sup>113</sup> Even at his most extreme in the *Messe de la Pentecôte* (1949-50) and *Livre d'Orgue* (1951) Messiaen is still attempting to qualify if not transform his use of modernism through his religious aesthetics.

As I have demonstrated, there is a synergy in *L'Ascension* and *La Nativité* between the writings of Marmion and Messiaen's naïve and pictorial music. Messiaen himself seems to want to present his music as faith while sidelining references to the modernist techniques of superimposition, collage and harmonic multiple meaning that inhabit his scores. For analysts such as Allen Forte, technique is the point of the music, yet this seems to misunderstand that Messiaen is radical in his naïvety.<sup>114</sup> Messiaen's ideas of time and eternity are intricately linked to certain ideals of love. Messiaen uses these concepts to transfigure the aesthetics of modernity from within and in so doing marks himself out as an iconoclast and paves the road to his involvement with Surrealism in the 1940s.

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<sup>111</sup> Op. Cit., Marmion, 414-15.

<sup>112</sup> Massin, Brigitte, *Olivier Messiaen: une poétique du merveilleux* (Aix-en-provence: Alinéa, 1989), 172. Messiaen states that he wanted to show that it was possible to write organ music without referring to the post-Franck idiom.

<sup>113</sup> I say 'unqualified' here because I refer to Messiaen as a religious modernist throughout this study. See Jolivet's other major organ works: *Hymne à l'univers* (1961-2) and *Mandala* (1969).

<sup>114</sup> See Allen Forte's 'Olivier Messiaen as Serialist', *Music Analysis*, Vol. 21, no.1 (March 2002), 3-34.



**Fig. 3** Roland Penrose *L'Île Invisible* or *Seeing is Believing* (1937)



## Chapter 4: Love, Mad Love and the 'Point Sublime'

In an interview given in 1962, Messiaen explained that his music of the late 1940s was 'plus ou moins surréaliste' and that, in Messiaen's own accompanying *textes explicatifs* to his works, he had endeavoured to pastiche the works of André Breton (1896-1966), Paul Éluard (1895-1952) and Pierre Reverdy (1889-1960),<sup>1</sup> poets who, in the 1920s and 1930s, were at the cutting edge of the Parisian artistic *demi-monde*. Even by the late 1940s, a time when Messiaen was a 'grand lecteur' of these writers, their presence and influence remained unabated.<sup>2</sup> Yet, why was Messiaen, a devout Roman Catholic, reading such surrealist literature? How could this movement have influenced him? After all, just because one reads something it doesn't mean that one 'takes it on board'? And yet he cites these authors, and particularly Reverdy and Éluard, as important influences on his life and work.<sup>3</sup>

For Messiaen Surrealism provided a means of making his religion more modern. Indeed the fusion of Catholicism and Surrealism is itself intrinsically surrealist as much as the juxtaposition of the seemingly disparate ideas of modes, colours, time, love and birdsong. Surrealism gave him the creative impetus to experiment beyond his previous boundaries while absorbing more modernist thinking into his music.

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<sup>1</sup> *Entretien avec Olivier Messiaen*, 11-13 October 1962 included with a recording of his *Turangalila-Symphonie*, Vega 30 BVG 1363.

<sup>2</sup> Goléa, Antoine, *Rencontres avec Olivier Messiaen* (Paris: René Julliard, 1960), 155; Messiaen states that at the time of composing *Harawi* he was a great reader of Reverdy, Éluard and 'a beautiful work of André Breton on surrealism and painting. It [*Harawi*] is therefore almost entirely surrealist, with the exception of certain images taken from the mountains of the Dauphiné ...'.

For a composer who was so keen to stage-manage his public persona, the seemingly unlikely presence of Surrealism in his aesthetics might make the would-be biographer curious about what other influences Messiaen suppresses in his writings. For instance, he once stated that his music has nothing to do with Scriabin yet, in its hedonistic emphasis on colour and theosophical exhortations, not to mention the use of roving dominant harmony and the octatonic scale (mode 2), it appears much more likely that Messiaen may have passed through a baptism of Scriabin's fire and passed through not altogether unscathed.<sup>4</sup> In Messiaen's music, fragments and misprisions of Wagner, Stravinsky, Debussy, Ravel, Tournemire and Berg all congregate in his scores. Likewise, a surrealist juxtaposition and inculcation of ideas and images from the poetry and aesthetic writings of Breton, Éluard and Reverdy appear in Messiaen's songs in particular, engendering a new complexity in his music of the late 1930s and 1940s.

## I

Born out of the ruins of Dada and on the wings of a spirit of artistic revolution, Surrealism absorbed, amongst other things, Freudian acquisitions and Hegelian dialectics with the intention to 'transform the world, change life, and remake all things in the understanding of the word human'.<sup>5</sup> In the *First Surrealist manifesto* (1924), André Breton gives the following 'definition':

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<sup>3</sup> *TMLM*, 8.

<sup>4</sup> Op. Cit., Rössler, 111-12. Messiaen's dismissively states of Scriabin: 'I hold him in high esteem, although I haven't learnt from him'. Vladimir Askenazy once stated that Scriabin's music is wildly, decadently insane; if one substituted erotico-religious for the final word this could easily apply to Messiaen.

<sup>5</sup> Bédouin, Jean-Louis, *Vingt ans de Surréalisme 1939-1959* (Paris: Denoël, 1959), 192 quoted in Mary Ann Caws *Surrealism and the literary imagination: a study of Breton and Bachelard* (The

**SURREALISM**, noun.masc. Pure psychic automatism by which it is intended to express, either verbally or in writing, the true function of thought. Thought dictated in the absence of all control exerted by reason, and outside all aesthetic or moral preoccupations.

**ENCYCL. Philos.** Surrealism is based on the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of association heretofore neglected, in the omnipotence of the dream, and in the disinterested play of thought. It leads to the permanent destruction of all other psychic mechanisms and to its substitution for them in the solution of the principal problems of life.<sup>6</sup>

For the surrealists, only through revealing the hidden life of our unconscious, by the engendering of a heightened or ecstatic sensibility of automatism, can real truth or a higher state of being be revealed. Poetically, this could only be achieved by pushing the limits of language in order to release semantic serendipity and most importantly, beauty. Implicit in this is the process of self-reflection, catharsis and transfiguration that I have argued is sedimented in Messiaen's music. The reconfiguration of 'language' then has the power and responsibility of reinvigorating our recognisance of our true selves which, in the Catholic parlance of predestination, is our Christ-like image beyond the limits of language. One can sense such a quasi-religious passion for the irreal in Salvador Dali's 'definition' of ecstasy:<sup>7</sup>

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Hague: Mouton, 1966). '*... transformer le monde, changer la vie, refaire de toutes pièces l'entende mot humain*'.

<sup>6</sup> Breton, André, *Manifestos of Surrealism*, 'First Surrealist Manifesto' (1924), trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Love (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972), 26.

<sup>7</sup> In a footnote to p. 10 of *Surrealism and Painting*, trans. Simon Watson Taylor (London: Macdonald, 1972), Breton states that: 'Everything that is doddering, squint-eyed, vile, polluted and grotesque is summed up for me in that one word, God'. Although originally published in this 1972 version by Gallimard in 1965, the version of this book Messiaen probably would have known was the Brentano edition of 1946. This has much less material in it than the 1965 edition, which contains essays written by Breton on art in the intervening years.

Ecstasy - Ecstasy constitutes the pure state of exacting and hyperaesthetic vital lucidity: blind lucidity of desire. It is *par excellence* the critical mental state that implausible actual thought - hysterical, modern, surrealist and phenomenal - aspires to render continuous.<sup>8</sup>

For the surrealist poet Louis Aragon, such a heightened sensibility is linked to human freedom when he states that: 'the relationship which is produced from the negation of the real by the marvellous is essentially ethical, and the marvellous is always the materialisation of a moral symbol in a violent opposition with the morality of the world in whose centre it appears'.<sup>9</sup> One can sense in Messiaen's music that the search for God in art has a 'hyperaesthetic vital lucidity' that attempts to render the implausible, the modern, surrealist and phenomenal continuously through his output. But more than this, Messiaen's religious mission to render Christ appreciable to humanity and transform the world marries a moral dimension with a radical imperative that intrinsically requires him to break apart or reform conventional musical language through an ecstatic art that is violently opposed to *la vie quotidienne*.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the notion of creating art in defiance of the world in order to transfigure it could not possibly have failed to meet the approval of the young

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<sup>8</sup> Dali, Salvador, in Paul Éluard en collaboration avec André Breton, 'Dictionnaire abrégé du surréalisme' (1938), in Éluard, *Œuvres Complètes*, I (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), 743. EXTASE. – 'L'Extase constitue l'état pur d'exigeante et hyperesthésique lucidité vitale, lucidité aveugle du désir. Elle est par excellence l'état mental critique que l'invraisemblable pensée actuelle, hystérique, moderne, surréaliste et phénoménale aspire à rendre continue.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted by Patrick Waldberg in *Le Surréalisme: sources, histoire, affinités, a catalogue published by the Galerie Charpentier*, 1964; stated in Mary Ann Caws *The Poetry of Dada and Surrealism* (New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1970), 20. It is easy then to see how the left-wing (communist) position of this movement came to the fore resulting in Breton's *Second Surrealist Manifesto* (1930).

Messiaen; already steeped in the traditional dogma and doctrine of the Catholic church and the writings of Marmion and Ernest Hello, not to mention the music of Tournemire, with their overriding message that humanity and the world must be transfigured. After all, to remind the world of eternal (Catholic) truths and the beauty contained in them, especially through a transfiguration of some of the most avant-garde and *à la mode* ideas, would surely be the task of 'a great artisan and a great Christian'.<sup>11</sup>

If the transfiguration of the world is to take place, then action is imperative - an ideal elaborated by the critic Ferdinand Alquié when he states that:

What the surrealist condemns is beauty as a spectacle, beauty separated from action and from life, a beauty to be contemplated, which does not instantly transform the person perceiving it. For all aesthetic perception of the beautiful supposes precisely an attitude of onlooking, of attachment, of withdrawal.<sup>12</sup>

What was needed was a means of galvanising the listener into a participation in the redemptive process: by shocking him out of the ordinary. Baudelaire's dictum that 'le beau est toujours bizarre' could easily be superscribed on most of Messiaen's scores.

Beauty for the surrealist was present in the irrational and violent juxtaposition of objects and ideas, like Lautréamont's juxtaposition of an umbrella and a sewing machine, in order to engender new references (by a Hegelian *Aufhebung* or diremption).<sup>13</sup> While the sedimentation of such seismic linguistic disturbances is

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<sup>10</sup> Op. Cit., Samuel, 14. 'I'm partial to the fantastic side of surrealism, to the sort of science fiction that goes beyond reality and science itself.'

<sup>11</sup> *TMLM*, 8.

<sup>12</sup> 'Le Surréalisme et la beauté', *Surrealismo e simbolismo* (Padua, 1965), quoted in Caws *The Poetry of Dada and Surrealism*, Op. Cit., 7.

<sup>13</sup> Op. Cit., Caws, *The Poetry of Dada and Surrealism*, 168.

apparent in the titles of some of Messiaen's early piano *Préludes* (1929) such as *Le nombre léger*, *Cloches d'angoisse et larmes d'adieu* and *Plainte calme*, along with more obviously Baudelairian and symbolist titles: *Chant d'extase dans un paysage triste*, *Les sons impalpables du rêve* and *Un reflet dans le vent*, it was the immediacy of his musical language that attempted to convey the unreal within the real - the region where psychological states and emotions confront exterior events and objects in order to engender new meanings.

The subjective connection, by the reader/participant between such disparate states, linked by a *fil conducteur* or linking idea, allows a perpetual dynamic process of context and contrast. Spontaneity, or as Breton puts it *disponibilité*, entails a dialectic between the conscience and unconscious (or semiconscious), 'reality and dream, present and absence, identity and distance, intimacy and slowness, unity and multiplicity, continuity and discontinuity, language and silence, mobility and immobility, clarity and obscurity, and so on.'<sup>14</sup>

Linguistic juxtaposition, the surrealists believed, could engender a *nouveau monde* of lyric intensity through its irrational power to shock. This is mirrored in Messiaen's music in a higher synthesis of traditional and non-traditional notions of development (especially in the shuffling of *personnages rythmiques*) and tonality, not to mention birdsong and colour (discussed in Chapter 5). Even in Messiaen's *Le Banquet Céleste*, contemplation and catharsis, communion and transfiguration make the Catholic belief in the ingestion of the transubstantiated body and blood of Christ into high surrealist drama. However, what is most shocking about the work is its subversive interpolation of religious belief and an erotic musical language.

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<sup>14</sup> Op. Cit., Caws, 19.

Such a conjuncture seems to complement Breton's contemporaneous dictum that 'Beauty shall be convulsive or not at all'.<sup>15</sup> Breton goes further to posit 'love' at the heart of his surrealist poetics of convulsive beauty:

This blind aspiration towards the best would suffice to justify love as I think of it, absolute love, as the only principle for physical and moral selection which can guarantee that human witness, human passage shall not have taken place in vain.<sup>16</sup>

The symbolic re-enactment of the last supper, the love of God present in the sacrament and the love of God for mankind, manifested in Christ's crucifixion and redemption of humanity, are all powerful axiomatic symbols commemorated in Messiaen's *Le Banquet Céleste*. If love, for the surrealist, is the human *point sublime* that life and art aspire to, then the redemptive action of Christ, expressed through a hyper-aesthetic musical language, was for Messiaen the *point sublime* of beauty and truth.

The surrealist search for beauty and truth through opposition and juxtaposition of ideas is important in Pierre Reverdy's poetry and aesthetics.<sup>17</sup> There is some very slight evidence that Messiaen knew Reverdy, yet the occasional

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<sup>15</sup> Breton, André, *Nadja* (Paris: Gallimard, 1929), 155.

<sup>16</sup> Breton, André, *L'Amour fou* [*Mad Love*], trans. Mary Ann Caws (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), 117.

<sup>17</sup> Messiaen may have become interested in him as a result of hearing about Reverdy's conversion to Roman Catholicism in 1921 (baptised on May 2<sup>nd</sup>). This led to the story 'La Conversion' in *Risques et Périls: Contes 1915-1928* (Paris: Flammarion, 1972), 65-82. See Andrew Rothwell, *Textual Spaces: The Poetry of Pierre Reverdy* (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1989), 204-209. Rothwell reads this story as both a satirical attack on Max Jacob's (Reverdy's godfather) religious insincerity and at the same time as guilt and the desire for repentance, the problems of fame and recognition and Reverdy's personal progression from poetic idealism to religious faith.



quotations in Messiaen's writings do little justice to the profound effect of Reverdy's aesthetics and poetry on Messiaen's music.<sup>18</sup> In his essay '*L'image*' Reverdy makes the link between inspiration and emotion:

The Image is a pure creation of spirit. It is not born of a comparison but of the *rapprochement* of two more or less distant realities. The more distant and pertinent the rapport between the two realities, the stronger the image - even more it will have emotive power and poetic reality(.) ... But it is not the image which is great - it is the emotion provoked by it; the greatness of the image can be judged by this measure ... it is the surprise and joy of finding oneself before a new thing.<sup>19</sup>

Messiaen's conjunction of the distant ideas of naïve spiritual imagery and modernist music in *L'Ascension* is an essentially surrealist dialectic designed to provoke extreme

<sup>18</sup> In Guy Bernard-Dalapierre's 'Souvenirs sur Olivier Messiaen', *Formes et Couleurs*, nos 3-4 (1945) unpaginated [p.10], he writes: 'How different from the audience who came to my drawing-room to listen intently to the *Visions de l'Amen*, the *Quatuor* or the *Vingt Regards*! That was a rapt, appreciative audience of young people, squashed between the narrow walls of the old house and overflowing out onto the staircase, an enthusiastic audience including Georges Braque, Pierre Reverdy, Valentine Hugo, André Jolivet ...' In addition, Messiaen mentions meeting Reverdy on three occasions during the Summer of 1944 in his diary. I am grateful to Nigel Simeone for this information. A Reverdy quotation ends Messiaen's article: 'le rythme chez Strawinsky', Op. Cit., 92. See also p. 8 of *TMLM* and various quotes in the volumes of *TRCO*. Reverdy's early criticism is marked by an idealist emphasis on discipline and artistic control mixed with a taste for asceticism and a self-conscious individuality that may have appealed to the young Messiaen.

<sup>19</sup> Reverdy, Pierre, '*L'image*' in *Œuvres complètes: Nord Sud, Self Defense et autre écrits sur l'art et la poésie (1917-1926)* (Paris: Flammarion, 1975), 73-5. (This article first appeared in *Nord Sud* no. 13, March 1918). '*L'image* est une création pure de l'esprit. Elle ne peut naître d'une comparaison mais du rapprochement de deux réalités plus ou moins éloignées. Plus les rapports de deux réalités rapprochées seront lointain et justes, plus l'image sera forte-plus elle aura de puissance émotive et de réalité poétique(.) ... C'est qui est grand ce n'est pas l'image - mais l'émotion qu'elle provoque; si cette dernière est grande on estimera l'image à sa mesure ... Il y a la surprise est la joie de se trouver devant une chose neuve.'

emotion.<sup>20</sup> 'Emotion and sincerity' in *L'Ascension* attempts to move the soul upwards towards eternity 'by sure and clear means.'<sup>21</sup> Both *L'Ascension* and *La Nativité* have an eschatological *raison d'être* that transcends the horrors of modernity. Reverdy states that 'Reality does not motivate the work of art. It departs from life to await another reality.'<sup>22</sup> Four years later, Reverdy's 'other reality' is given a religious spin: 'The poet is essentially the man who aspires to the real plane, the divine plane, the mysterious and evident creation.'<sup>23</sup> Messiaen is such a poet whose aesthetics have enormous resonances with Reverdy's book of aphorisms *Le Gant de Crin* (1927), a work to be found on Messiaen's book shelf.<sup>24</sup>

Again Reverdy repeats the necessity of art to transport man 'beyond this reality' [*au delà de cette réalité*],<sup>25</sup> a reality dogged by materialism and idealism ('two

<sup>20</sup> Op. Cit., Demarquez, 203-4. 'In *L'Ascension* Olivier Messiaen has sought, as in certain previous works, to fire the spirit [*frapper l'esprit*] of his listeners, by all means, ... [.] He has, simply, sincerely exposed the mystical ideal which it possesses, and it is in this that his work is stirring [*émouvante*] ...

<sup>21</sup> Messiaen's *Note de L'Auteur* to *La Nativité du Seigneur*, book 1.

<sup>22</sup> 'La Réalité ne motive pas l'œuvre d'art. On part de la vie pour attendre une autre réalité.' 'Self Defense', *Critiques-Esthetiques* (1919), in *Œuvres complètes: Nord Sud, Self Defense et autre écrits sur l'art et la poésie (1917-1926)*, 117. This idea of *l'autre* can be seen in the final line of *La Jetée*, the last line of which was used by Messiaen on p. 8 of *TMLM* (see below).

<sup>23</sup> Reverdy, Pierre, 'Poésie' (first published in 'Le Journal littéraire on 7 June 1924), *Œuvres complètes: Nord Sud, Self Defense et autre écrits sur l'art et la poésie (1917-1926)*, Op.Cit., 206. 'Le poète est essentiellement l'homme qui aspire au domaine réel, le plan divin, la création mystérieuse et évidente.'

<sup>24</sup> I noticed this and several other volumes of Reverdy on Messiaen's book shelf when I interviewed Yvonne Loriod-Messiaen on 17 September 1999. *Le Gant de Crin* seemed particularly well-thumbed and had page markers left in it.

<sup>25</sup> Reverdy, Pierre, *Le Gant de Crin* (Paris: Plon, 1927), 28. On p. 20 he states simply: 'Rêver, c'est fuir. Le rêve est un refuge, une perspective de fuite. Un gouffre où l'esprit s'effondre et se dérobe, évitant le contact avec la réalité.'

equally dangerous blindnesses').<sup>26</sup> For the new (Christian) Reverdy, art must reflect its epoch: 'Works that are not a faithful mirror to their epoch disappear faster than their epoch(.)',<sup>27</sup> be **lyrical**: 'Lyricism ... is an aspiration towards the unknown, an indispensable explosion of being dilated by emotion towards the exterior'(.),<sup>28</sup> and **static**: 'All the works of great periods are static, simple, mysterious, of a profound radiance ...'<sup>29</sup> Messiaen's would have had little problem absorbing such an art. But on top of all this, love is given a high priority in Reverdy's aesthetics:

In effect, the only thing demanded is love, and God, alone; abstraction made of the created world and ourselves must be a perfect and eternal movement of pure love. The secret of being is love. The secret of death is hatred.<sup>30</sup>

Such dogmatism is further propagated through his belief that man must be humble before God in order to appreciate his unique grandeur and to feel the rapport that exists between God 'the infinitely good and perfect [*l'infiniment Bon et Parfait*] and man 'infinitely small, feeble and imperfect' [*l'infiniment petit, faible et imparfait*].<sup>31</sup> If

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 54, 'deux aveuglements également dangereux'. On p. 95 Reverdy writes: 'Notre époque consomme la disparition de l'oisif, du viveur du dandy inutile dont la seule fonction était de gâcher sa vie et son argent. On nous a institué un nouvel honneur, celui de l'argent gagné.'

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 94. Les œuvres qui ne sont que le fidèle miroir d'une époque s'enfoncent dans le temps aussi vite que cette époque(.).'

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 40, 'Le lyrisme qui va vers l'inconnu, vers la profondeur, participe naturellement du mystère. La part faite au mystère, la conscience qu'on décidé d'en tirer les poètes modernes, caractérisent notre époque.'

<sup>29</sup> Reverdy, Pierre, *Note éternelle du présent: Écrits sur l'art (1923-1960)*, (Paris: Flammarion, 1973), 19, 'Tout les œuvres des grandes époques sont statiques, simples, mystérieuses, d'un rayonnement profond.'

<sup>30</sup> Op. Cit., *Le Gant de Crin*, 147. 'En effet, la seule chose qu'il demande, c'est l'amour, et dieu, seul, abstraction faite du monde créé et de nous-même, doit être un mouvement parfait et éternel de pur amour. Le secret de l'être, c'est l'amour. Celui de la mort, c'est la haine.'

<sup>31</sup> Op. Cit., *Le Gant de Crin*, 172-3.

the spirit of Catholic indoctrination and obedience is evident here, such naïve optimism did not remain untarnished for long after Reverdy left Paris on 30 May 1926 for Solesmes, the home of the plainchant revival.<sup>32</sup> Leaving behind the metropolis with all its worldly trappings, he became a recluse, his uncertain faith crumbling soon after. Yet the religious experience had left its mark on his aesthetics; evident in the transcendental function he affords to poetry:

Poetry is an immense love of life. The need to express this love, the sentiment of impotence in expressing this love, and finally the transformation of this sentiment of impotence into a completely different thing called a poem: the miracle - so far from reality.<sup>33</sup>

Poetry for Reverdy is the crucible for the joy of life that belies the struggles inherent in achieving this 'miracle'. In *Apparition de l'Église éternelle* Messiaen posits that humanity is only brought to perfection through trial and strife. For Reverdy and Messiaen art is a road that leads to succour and salvation:

Art is a superior aspiration to all forms of life. Nature is life itself. And death, a semblance of anti-nature, is in fact the transcendent transformation of life. In coupling the two terms together with such ease and freedom the spirit releases only the privileged anxiety of two poles between which the pathetic destiny of man and everything else unwinds.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> One can sense Marmion's notion of 'fallen humanity' here. Op. Cit., Marmion, 311.

<sup>33</sup> 'Pour en finir avec la poésie' (1938) in *Cette émotion appelée poésie (Écrits sur la poésie 1930-1960)*, (Paris: Flammarion, 1964), 122. 'La poésie est un amour démesuré de la vie. Le besoin d'exprimer cette amour - le sentiment d'impuissance à exprimer cette amour - enfin la transformation de cet sentiment d'impuissance en une tout autre chose qu'on appelle un poème - le miracle - si loin de réalité.'

<sup>34</sup> 'La nature aux abois' (1940), 34. 'L'Art est une aspiration supérieure à toutes les formes de la vie. La nature, c'est la vie même. Et la mort, en apparence l'anti-nature, en fait, la

Reverdy's references to nature, the status of God imparted through the alternative reality of art which can revive humanity's fallen status, and the overriding *fil conducteur* role of love, all resonate in Messiaen's music. But more than this Messiaen appears to see in Messiaen the aesthetics that justify his role as a redeemer of society through art. This is intimated in the final lines of *La jetée* from *Les ardoises du toit* (1918), a poem that we can be sure that Messiaen read because he quotes the final line of this poem in the preface to *TMLM* to justify his role as a 'liberator':<sup>35</sup>

Les étoiles sont derrière le mur  
 Dedans saute un cœur qui voudrait sortir  
 Aime le moment qui passe  
                   A force ta mémoire est lasse  
 D'écouter des cadavres de bruits  
 Dans le silence  
                   Rien ne vit  
 Au fond de l'eau l'image s'emprisonne  
 Au bord du ciel une cloche qui sonne  
 La voile est un morceau du port qui se détache  
 Tu restes là  
                   Tu regardes ce que s'en va  
 Quelqu'un chante et tu ne comprends pas  
 La voix vient de plus haut  
                   L'homme vient de plus loin  
                   Tu voudrais respirer à peine  
 Et l'autre aspirerait le ciel tout d'une haleine<sup>36</sup>

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transformation transcendante de la vie. En accouplant les deux termes on a joint, avec cette aisance et cette gratuité don't l'esprit détient seul l'inquiétant privilège les deux pôles entre lesquels se déroule la destinée pathétique de l'homme et de tout ce qui est.'

<sup>35</sup> *TMLM*, 8: '... the liberator. And, beforehand, let us offer him two thoughts. First, that of Reverdy: "May he draw in the whole sky in one breath!"'

<sup>36</sup> This version was published in *Plupart des Temps I* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945). Rothwell points out that the revisions Reverdy made in 1945, made as manuscript additions on the 1<sup>st</sup> edition copy held at the Fons Littéraire Jacques Doucet in Paris, reduced the Cubist aspects of these poems by evening out the syntax and regularising the typography (Reverdy's typography was obviously inspired by Mallarmé's *Un coup de dés*). See Rothwell Op. Cit., 181-202.

Messiaen posits himself as the man who comes from far off - a man composing in the twentieth century but with a pre-Enlightenment certainty of faith that will 'breathe in the sky' and transform the world 'in one breath'. The poem implies the necessity of a conduit between the omniscient 'tu' (perhaps Christ) 'behind the wall' of mortality and the strife of modernity (*cadavres de bruits*). Music for Messiaen was this conduit that attempted to close the gap between these seemingly distant images to create a strong emotional or cathartic response in humanity.

Reverdy uses birds as a metaphor for the special qualities that would be required of a man that might lead modernity out of its malaise: qualities that Messiaen believed he possessed.<sup>37</sup>

There are people in the world who can easily bear the wailing of factory sirens, the blaring of car horns, the stupid barking of dogs, but who are unable to hear birdsong without disquiet.

Birds sing for themselves alone. But it happens that, in order to sing the loudest, certain birds search out the brotherhood of mankind.<sup>38</sup>

Messiaen is surely one of those birds that sing of the fraternisation of humanity. Birds, as the voice of God in nature, are one of his iconic tools in his project of realising the invisible presence of Christ in music, and they are a frequent image used in *Les*

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<sup>37</sup> *TMLM*, 8.

<sup>38</sup> Op. Cit., *Le Gant de Crin*, 36. 'Il y a des gens au monde qui supportent aisément les hurlements des sirènes d'usine, les beuglements des trompes d'autos, les aboiements stupides des chiens, mais qui ne peuvent entendre sans malaise un chant d'oiseau.'

Les oiseaux chantent pour eux seuls. Mais il arrive que certains oiseaux semblent rechercher, pour chanter le plus fort, le voisinage de l'homme.' Éluard has also written 'Il y a un mot qui m'exalte, un mot que je n'ai jamais entendu sans ressentir un grand frisson, un grand espoir, le plus grand, celui de vaincre les puissances de ruine et de mort qui accablent les hommes, ce mot c'est: fraternisation.' *L'évidence poétique* (1937), *Œuvres complètes I*, 520.

*ardoises du toit* and throughout Reverdy's poetry. In *Réclame*, they seem to be an image of the possibility of transcendence after the darkness of the crucifixion:<sup>39</sup>

Hangar monté  
                                   la porte ouverte  
 Le ciel  
           En haut deux mains se sont offertes  
 Les yeux levés  
                           Une voix monte  
 Les toits se sont mis à trembler  
 Le vent lance des feuilles mortes  
 Et les nuages retardés  
 Marchent vers l'autre bout du monde  
 Qui se serait mis à siffler  
 Dans le calme d'un soir d'été  
 Le chant  
                   L'oiseau  
                                   Les étoiles  
 Et la lune pour t'écouter

Through images of opening doors, the two hands, the lifted eyes and the ascending voice, Reverdy's poem speaks of an eschatological desire that cannot reach beyond earthly confines. Only the song of birds and the stars intimate the possibility of eternity. One only need hear the line, '*Tous les oiseaux des étoiles*' in *Amour oiseaux d'étoile* (Harawi no.10), a line engraved on a tablet near the place where Messiaen's ashes were scattered, to realise that Messiaen must have recognised in Reverdy's lines the longing and desire, as in *L'Ascension*, for freedom in the beyond.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Op. Cit., Reverdy, *Plupart du Temps I*, 165. Crucifixion is a recurring image in these poems, especially evident in *Pointe* and in *Au carrefour des routes* from *Étoile peintes* (1921). The line 'Deux bras sont restés étendus' from *Pointe* may have inspired the opening of the text of *Les Offrandes oubliées*: 'Les bras étendus, triste jusqu'à la mort ...' see also *Quelque part* from *La Guitare endormie* (1919): 'Les murs saignant, au bord du ciel où grimpent les épines. La couronne du monde enserre le front torturé du couchant'.

<sup>40</sup> See also *Départ* from *Les ardoises du toit* in *Plupart des Temps I*, Op. Cit., 179.

The idea of birdsong as a metaphor for God's presence is surrealist enough even without Messiaen's quasi-*personnages rythmiques* juxtaposition of this material with his modes in heterophonic textures (see Chapter 5). Their verisimilitudinous supra-reality is an image, in Reverdyan terms, designed to engage with reality to provoke emotion. Reverdy's cubist juxtaposition of ideas, objects and presences in his poetry finds its harvest home in Messiaen's juxtaposition of speeds and temporal dimensions in his music. These engender a dynamism, rather than the desired 'staticism' in Reverdy/Messiaen, which is detectable not only in Messiaen's poetry, but in the shuffling of *personnages* and his recontextualisation of musical material. More importantly though, Reverdy's notion of the transformative role of the artist finds its apogee in Messiaen's redemptive aesthetics and music, where art is to transfigure the world by embracing it.



## II

While Reverdy never became part of Breton's surrealist movement proper, he nevertheless shared certain aesthetic affinities with its main protagonists, particularly in the high priority given to love and the technique of collage. Writing of collage in 1939, the surrealist poet Paul Éluard extolled its capacity for the way heterogeneous elements can result in unexpected *rapprochements* and celebrated its conquest of the irrational.<sup>41</sup> Yet, with 'love' as the central theme of his poetry, Éluard's writing celebrates as much as it conquers the irrational, the juxtaposition of desire and despair engendering its own dynamic. Certainly, from *Mourir de ne pas mourir* (1924) onwards, love is a *point sublime* of 'le merveilleux'; celebrated for its ecstasy and radiance as much as for its frustration and loss:

Je me suis enfermé dans mon amour, je rêve.  
Amour, ô mon amour, j'ai fait vœu de te perdre.<sup>42</sup>

Perhaps because of this dual dynamic of desire and fear of loss, women are spiritually idolised in his poetry, as in *L'Amoureuse*:

Elle est debout sur mes paupières  
Et ses cheveux sont dans les miens,  
Elle a la forme de mes mains,  
Elle a la couleur de mes yeux,  
Elle s'engloutit dans mon ombre  
Comme une pierre sur le ciel.<sup>43</sup>

'Elle' is objectified in the litanic form, later used by Messiaen, as the *fil conducteur* or

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<sup>41</sup> Éluard, Paul, 'Donner à voir' (1939), *Œuvres Complètes* I, 973-4. In Septembre-October 1938 Éluard broke with Breton because he disapproved of Breton's foundation of the *Fédération internationale de l'art révolutionnaire indépendant*. See Éluard, *Œuvres complètes* I, lxx.

<sup>42</sup> Éluard, Paul, 'Au défaut du silence' (1925), *Œuvres complètes* I, 165 and 167.

<sup>43</sup> Éluard, Paul, *L'Amoureuse* from *Mourir de ne pas mourir* (1924), *Œuvres Complètes* I, 140.

linking motif. Her personal features: hair, hands, eyelids and eyes are swallowed up by the lover. Eyes are a reciprocal medium for Éluard, between the imagination and reality, acting as mirrors in which lovers can see each other; a communion of cosmic dimensions:

La courbe de tes yeux fait le tour de mon cœur,  
Un rond de danse et de douceur,  
Auréole du temps, berceau nocturne et sûr,  
Et si je ne sais plus ce que j'ai vécu  
C'est que tes yeux ne m'ont pas toujours vu.

Feuilles de jour et mousse de rosée,  
Roseaux du vent, sourires parfumés,  
Ailes couvrant le monde de lumière,  
Bateaux chargés du ciel et de la mer,  
Chasseurs des bruits et sources des couleurs,

Parfums éclos d'une couvée d'aurores  
Qui gît toujours sur la paille des astres,  
Comme le jour dépend de l'innocence  
Le monde entier dépend de tes yeux purs  
Et tout mon sang coule dans leurs regards.<sup>44</sup>

This notion of the eyes predominates in Messiaen's songs. One can only suppose that such images of love, light, sky, sea, stars, colours and birds, all found in this poem, must have attracted Messiaen to Éluard's lyric poetry where birds are associated with freedom and light as in *Au cœur de mon amour*:

Un bel oiseau me montre la lumière  
Elle est dans ses yeux, bien en vue.  
Il chante sur une boule de gui  
Au milieu du soleil.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Éluard, Paul, from *Capitale de la douleur* (1926), *Œuvres Complètes* I, 196.

<sup>45</sup> Éluard, Paul, 'Au cœur de mon amour' from *Mourir de ne pas mourir*, *Œuvres Complètes* I, 137.

Birds are a symbol of innocence and luminosity, immortality and transcendence that is threatened by modern life. It is then a small step to grasp such resonances in Messiaen's use of the bird as a metaphor for the voice of God in nature; a presence that transcends *la vie moderne*.

Éluardian images of light, hands, eyes, sky, stars and birds are all objectified in Messiaen's *Trois Mélodies* (1930). In the first song *Pourquoi?*, Messiaen uses Éluard's litanic technique, each line beginning with *Pourquoi*:

Pourquoi les oiseaux de l'air,  
 Pourquoi les reflets de l'eau,  
 Pourquoi les nuages du ciel,  
 Pourquoi?  
 Pourquoi les feuilles de l'Automne,  
 Pourquoi les roses de l'Été,  
 Pourquoi les chansons du Printemps,  
 Pourquoi?  
 Pourquoi n'ont-ils pour moi de charmes,  
 Pourquoi?  
 Pourquoi? Ah! Pourquoi? Pourquoi? Pourquoi? Pourquoi? Pourquoi?

Indeed, the last verse of Éluard's *Le Jeu de Construction*, makes one wonder if it was just the litanic technique that Messiaen borrowed:

Pourquoi pleurer la fleur séchée  
 Et pourquoi pleurer les lilas?  
 Pourquoi pleurer la rose d'ambre?  
 Pourquoi pleurer la pensée tendre?  
 Pourquoi chercher la fleur cachée  
     Si l'on n'a pas de récompense?  
     - Mais pour ça, ça et ça.<sup>46</sup>

But it is not just this technique that reveals the presence of surrealism here.

Messiaen's wonder at the natural world is the pretext for the ontological rhetorical

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<sup>46</sup> Éluard, Paul, 'Le jeu de construction' from *Mourir de ne pas mourir, Œuvres Complètes I*, 142-3.

question 'Why?' [*Pourquoi?*] that could be answered by the doctrine of predestination. The following songs seeks to answer the question. For Messiaen, predestination is linked to his mother's love in the second song and the presence of Christ in the third.<sup>47</sup> The most remarkable passage in *Pourquoi?* underlines Messiaen's surrealist poetics:

Ex. 90 *Pourquoi?* b. 22-5

<sup>47</sup> 'It was my Mother who pointed me, before I was born, toward nature and art. She did it in poetic terms; being a composer, I translated them later into music(.)', (Op.Cit., Samuel, 15) and 'Cécile Sauvage [his mother] said "I suffer from an unknown music." It is from that that I found my belief in predestination(.)', Op. Cit., Interview with Messiaen in *Diapason* no. 234 (December 1978), 38. Sauvage's words are from a cycle of poems written while pregnant with Messiaen entitled *L'Âme en Bourgeon*.

Although 'traditional' development is prefigured in the way the piano motive undergoes a process of 'elimination', the use of grace-note (*acciaccatura*) resonances and triadic chords above a B major chord (with an added 2<sup>nd</sup>) from b. 22, entails a surrealist juxtaposition of this birdsong-like material with Messiaen's modes that is anything but orthodox.<sup>48</sup> Furthermore the movement from the lower dominant (IV) through F# to the higher dominant (V) in the final two bars, as in *Le Banquet Céleste*, *Prière du Christ* (*L'Ascension* no.4) and *Les Enfants de Dieu* (*La Nativité* no.5), naïvely symbolises the filial link between mankind and God along with our predestination to be with God, whilst employing the greatest dissonance in the song - a surrealist dialectic indeed.<sup>49</sup>

The intimacy of inter-uterine filial love is juxtaposed with langorous 6-4 chords in mode 2 in *Le Sourire* that speak of the eternity from which Messiaen has come, while the final song utilises images of nature, angels, wings and the infantile 'pure smile like a child's heart' to eulogise Christ: *La fiancée perdue*.<sup>50</sup> Messiaen's surreal juxtaposition of imagery complements the juxtaposition of a modernist musical language and his Christian mission. Messiaen gives a tangible image of Reverdy's 'departure for another reality' in the movement from the diatonic world of nature and man (E major), through a short recitative (reminiscent of that used near the end of Ravel's *Ondine*) to the presence of Jesus in mode 2. As in *La Mort du Nombre*,

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<sup>48</sup> See the section on 'Melodic development through elimination' in *TMLM*, 35. Messiaen is describing the same process that Schoenberg calls liquidation in *Fundamentals of Musical Composition* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967). This section recalls the opening of *La Colombe* (*Préludes*) and prefigures the opening of *Ta Voix* (*Poèmes pour Mi*) and parts of *Harawi* and the *Catalogue d'oiseaux* (1956-8),

<sup>49</sup> The image of brilliant light is evoked in this passage, reminiscent of the bright trills and figurations in Tournemire's *L'Orgue Mystique* that intimate divine light.

<sup>50</sup> *Le Sourire* uses words by Messiaen's mother Cécile Sauvage.

Christ's transformative presence through modernity is clear. After implorations for blessings, grace and power, and finally repose, the music slows and stops. Only the name of Jesus remains to be heard in clear diatonic G major, its position as a 6-4 chord leaving the voice and humanity open [*disponible*] to an intimation of eternity in Christ.

The presence of Christ likewise haunts the early and rarely performed cantata *La mort du nombre* (1930), a work that in its form recalls Maurice Emmanuel's *In memoriam* Op.11 (1908).<sup>51</sup> The title of Messiaen's work intimates the Bergsonian notion of qualitative transformations that cannot be divided or construed in numerical terms, i.e. that which is static, immovable and eternal. Messiaen's cantata is a dialogue between two souls sung by a soprano and tenor (like *Pellèas et Mélisande*), in which the first soul, as an allegory of Christ as much as the eternal feminine, shows mankind (second soul) a way out of the despair of mortality to to everlasting life through love. The two protagonists, singing beyond their mortal coil, traverse a dialectic of distance towards reconciliation and redemption. The climax of the piece arrives at the moment of catharsis for mankind. The cry of 'I suffer!' *Je souffre!* (b. 84-88) is answered by the gentle Christological exhortation: Wait ... Hope! [*Attends! Espère!*]:

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<sup>51</sup> This work was published in 1909 and given a private performance on 29 March 1925. It is a chamber cantata for two voices (soprano and baritone), violoncello and piano that presents a dialogue between a son and his mother who has just died. As Messiaen's mother died in 1927,

Ex. 91 *La mort du nombre* b. 88-92

The musical score for Ex. 91, *La mort du nombre* b. 88-92, is presented in two systems. The first system (bars 88-92) features a vocal line for the 2nd Âme (tenor) and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line starts with 'Je souf - - - - - fre!' and then 'At - tends! \_\_\_\_ es - pé - re!'. The piano accompaniment is marked 'Animé' and 'Très lent'. The second system (bars 91-92) features a violin line and a piano accompaniment. The violin line is marked 'Lent' and 'p'. The piano accompaniment is marked 'Lent 8va' and 'p'.

For the second soul, at last the long pain of mortality is about to end. He is like a stone that is being polished to perfection to become part of the New Jerusalem (as in *Apparition de l'Eglise éternelle*). 'Wait! Hope!' is the moment of cathartic transformation for the second soul. The transition to eternity is symbolised in the key change from F-D-B major as much as by the 6-4 chords that prolong B major languorously through 76 bars, an image of the immutability of eternity. The brightness of this key and the envoiement of the souls' unity in the violin (*sans*

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could he have remembered Emmanuel's piece and sought to memorialise his own mother in *La mort du nombre*?

*sourdine* at last) is emphasised by the first soul who sings of the death of *la nombre* (mortality) and the unity of their souls beyond dreams, lighter than of the plumes of birds [*des oiseaux de plumes*]. The two souls are drawn in trembling ecstasy [*tremblant extase*] (symbolised in the piano arpeggiations) upwards [*au dessus d'un rêve*] and beyond into an eternal springtime [*un éternel printemps*]. Eventually even the voice of souls [*notre âme unique!*] dissolves into the B major rivulets of eternity - language is no longer being capable of expressing the rapture of divine union.

In this piece we have an incredibly clear image of the poetic departure for another reality of which Reverdy speaks. Through his key scheme, the dialogue and the alternation of the rumbustious and the serene, Messiaen attempts to provoke strong emotions and a powerful image of transformation. Reverdy's words 'On part de la vie pour attendre une autre réalité' could easily be the epigraph for this work.<sup>52</sup> Here is a piece that (following Reverdy) reflects its epoch, is lyrical, has an element of staticism (in the final section) and portrays an image of a Christ-like love that is stronger than death.

Symbolic references to ideas of filiation, predestination, eternity and love become prime concerns of Messiaen's major song cycle of the 1930s. On 22 June 1932, he married the violinist Louise Justine Delbos, known to the world as Claire and affectionately to Messiaen as 'Mi'. In the summer of 1936, he wrote a cycle of nine songs, *Poèmes pour Mi*, which he orchestrated the following year (first performed in this version in 1946). It is this version of the *Poèmes*, a title that emphasises their literary pedigree, on which I wish to concentrate, because the timbres more clearly express the ideas in the music. Essentially, these songs are a



celebration of marriage as a reflection of divine love, and the love of Christ for the church. The first song is entitled *Action de grâces* (Thanksgiving). In his book *Christ in his Mysteries*, Marmion cites thanksgiving as one of the acts of the offering that Christ made of himself:

It is certain that of all Graces, of all the mercies God can grant, the greatest, the most eminent, is that which was given to the Humanity of Jesus. God chose it, predestined it from among all others *prae consortibus tuis*, to be the Humanity of his son; to unite it, in an incomparable union to His Word. This is a unique grace, surpassing all that the human mind can imagine as to the communication of the Divinity with the creature.

Thus the soul of Jesus filled, by this union, with the delights of the Divinity itself, overflows in thanksgiving. If at times we ourselves know not how to express the abundance of our gratitude to our Heavenly Father, what must not have been the gratitude of the soul of Jesus for the ineffable grace given to it, for all the incomparable privileges which were to proceed from its union with the word?<sup>53</sup>

It is a reflection of this union in nature, in the personal characteristics and spiritual Graces of his spouse that Messiaen celebrates in this piece. Messiaen's litanic poetry and notion of reflection from the start are eminently Éluardian:

Et un œil près de mon œil, une pensée près de ma pensée,  
Et un visage qui sourit et pleure avec le mien,  
Et deux pieds derrière mes pieds,  
Comme le vague à la vague est unie.

Such an idea is intimated in the recontextualisation of *personnages* mirrored between

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<sup>52</sup> Op. Cit., Reverdy, 'Self Defense', *Critiques-Esthetiques*, (1919) in *Œuvres complètes: Nord Sud, Self Defense et autres écrits sur l'art et la poésie (1917-1926)*, 117.

<sup>53</sup> Op. Cit., Marmion, 82.

the two hands of the pianist. The image of looking returns throughout the songs:

je vois son visage (*Paysage*)

Je le vois dans ton œil. (*La Maison*)

Si elle s'ouvrait sur éternité  
Je te verrais plus belle encore (*Ta Voix*)

Ton œil et mon œil parmi les statues qui marchent (*Les Deux Guerriers*)

In *Action de grâces*, the couple become one soul 'full of love and immortality', truth, grace with its heritage of light all given 'in obedience and in the blood of thy Cross'.

They are able to thank God for the reflection of God in themselves. Nevertheless, Éluard reminds us that this reflection is only an intimation of a greater truth: 'Ah, may the day come when we can break the mirror, that final window, when our eyes can at last contemplate the *cerebral marvellous*'.<sup>54</sup>

The broken mirror is one of the most frequent images in Reverdy's early poetry where it signifies 'the search for transcendence, both external (beyond the horizon) and internal (self-knowledge); in both cases, the reality to which it seems to promise access turns out to be illusory ...'.<sup>55</sup> The destruction of the mirror is therefore associated with liberation.<sup>56</sup> In Messiaen's poetry, the mirror becomes a means of reflecting divine truth celebrated in human love, a reflection that, in the third song, can only be broken when 'Nous quitterons nos corps' to contemplate 'la Vérité'.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Éluard, Paul, *Les Feuilles libres* (January- February 1924), quoted in Caws, Op. Cit., 162.

<sup>55</sup> Op. Cit., Rothwell, 79.

<sup>56</sup> Op. Cit., Rothwell, 83.

<sup>57</sup> In this one can sense the presence of St Paul's first letter to the Corinthians: 'For now we see through a glass, darkly, but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as I am known.'

In the second song, the symbolist image of 'the lake like a big blue jewel ... between the corn and the sun' is an image of his wife that Messiaen turns to as an escape from reality ('the road full of sorrows and hollows, my feet that falter in the dust'). The reflection of her truth ('I see her face') is essential to his spiritual well-being. Such spiritualisation of women is not only found in Éluard, but also in Breton's *Nadja* (1928), *L'Amour fou* (1936) and in *Arcane 17* (1945) where he 'maintains that earthly salvation can come only through the redemptive power of woman'.<sup>58</sup> In Messiaen's *Ta Voix*, his wife is both idolised and idealised as a being full of the revelation of God like a 'window full of afternoon' that opens onto eternity.<sup>59</sup>

Tu est la servante du fils ...  
 Sa marque sur ton front  
 Tu complèterais le nombre des anges incorporels  
 A la gloire de la Trinité sainte.  
 Un toujours de bonheur élèverait ta voix fraîche  
 (Oiseau de printemps qui s'éveille):  
 Tu chanterais.

This sort of spiritualisation is likewise present in Éluard:

Ta bouche aux lèvres d'or n'est pas en moi pour rire  
 Et tes mots d'auréole ont un sens si parfait  
 Que dans mes nuits d'années, de jeunesse et de mort  
 J'entends vibrer **ta voix** dans tous les bruits du monde.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Op. Cit., Caws, 84.

<sup>59</sup> See *Patience* from Reverdy's *Les ardoises du toit*: Les voix qui s'élevaient tremblent à la horizon/Tout est calme dans la clairière; also a line in *Cortège*: Au timbre de ta voix le ciel tiède se vide/Les étoiles perdues tombent dans le ruisseau /Et sur ta main des perles brillent/Pourtant la pluie ne tombe pas /On éteint toutes les fenêtres ... C'est derrière le mur le plus épais que tout se passe ...

<sup>60</sup> Éluard, Paul, from *Au défaut de silence*, *Œuvres Complètes* I, 167 [bold is my emphasis].

The image of the open window is used by Éluard in a poem of thanksgiving and love;  
a veritable Action de grâce:

Je te l'ai dit pour les nuages  
Je te l'ai dit pour l'arbre de la mer  
Pour chaque vague pour les oiseaux dans les feuilles  
Pour les cailloux du bruit  
Pour les mains familières  
Pour l'œil qui devient visage au paysage  
Et le sommeil lui rend le ciel de sa couleur  
Pour toute la nuit boue  
Pour la grille des routes  
Pour la **fenêtre ouverte** pour un front découvert  
Je te l'ai dit pour tes pensées pour tes paroles  
Toute caresse toute confiance se survivent<sup>61</sup>

The notion of a window onto eternity seems implicit here, as it does in 'la porte ouverte' of Reverdy's *Réclame* quoted above, but in Messiaen's song it becomes a specific metaphor for the beloved.

Light is objectified in Messiaen's text but released in his *Poèmes*. Trills and tremoli are used throughout, as in Tournemire's music, as an intimation of glistening light. At the mention of birds in *Ta Voix*, two flutes and a piccolo pictorially improvise a short passage in Messiaen's *style oiseau*, over a halo of string tremoli and cymbals, recalling Éluard's 'Un bel oiseau me montre la lumière' quoted above.<sup>62</sup>

Other images of light include the divisi strings in the alleluia coda of the first song, the bird-like rising solo violin trills at the end of *Paysage*, the flickering of flames in *Épouvante* (after the words *puissances de feu*) and the détaché strings that, together with resonance of the tubular bells, enhance the image of the 'Carillonne' that sounds

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<sup>61</sup> Éluard, Paul, from *L'amour la poésie* (1929), *Œuvres Complètes* I, 230-1 [bold is my emphasis].

<sup>62</sup> This passage lacks the aggressive character of the piano version.

his love and, by implication, the love of Christ throughout the world.<sup>63</sup> As with their intimation of eternity in *L'Ascension*, the combination of harmonics and divided strings effects a ravishing and ecstatic chimera in *L'Épouse*, where they attempt to speak of the ineffable union of Messiaen and his wife, a tangible metaphor for the Church as the extension of Christ:

**Ex. 92 *L'Épouse* (end)**

The musical score for the end of *L'Épouse* is arranged for a vocal ensemble and a string ensemble. The vocal parts include: 1st and 2nd Soprano Solos, 1st and 2nd Alto Solos, and a Chorus (Alto, Tenor, Bass). The string ensemble consists of Violins, Violas, Cellos, and Double Basses. The score is in 4/4 time and features a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The vocal parts are marked with dynamics such as *ppp* (pianissimo) and *dim.* (diminuendo). The string parts are marked with *pp* (pianissimo) and *dim.* (diminuendo). The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and slurs, indicating a complex and expressive musical setting.

In the third song, Messiaen uses the image of a house as a metaphor for our mortal bodies that we will leave:<sup>64</sup>

<sup>63</sup> Divided strings are often used throughout Messiaen's career to provide a colourist intimation of ecstasy and eternity from the final part of *Les Offrandes oubliées* and the 4th movement of *L'Ascension* to the *Epôde (Chronochromie)* to *Le Christ, lumière du Paradis*, the final movement of *Éclairs sur l'au-delà*.

<sup>64</sup> Reverdy's *Veillée (Les ardoises du toit)* begins: *Entre la maison et le ciel ...*, 199. The idea of descending stars in this poem may be reflected in Messiaen's asking for a music that 'may open a few doors, take down some yet distant stars' (*TMLM*, 8). Mortality is likewise equated with *la*

Quand nous contemplerons la Vérité,  
 Dans des corps purs, jeunes, éternellement lumineux.

Again, a steadily ascending hierarchy of metaphors- maison, vérité, lumineux is released in a baptism of added-note chords and a weak phrygian cadence, where the subversive tone of muted horns is transcended by the resplendent image of a window opening onto eternity in a flute solo.<sup>65</sup>

**Ex. 93** *La Maison* (end)

Such images are contrasted in the song cycle by the strident music of the sacramental warriors marching through life's voyage (*Les Deux Guerriers*),<sup>66</sup> and the darkness of *Épouvante*, where the almost Bergian orchestration engenders a nightmare-hellish

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*maison* in Éluard's *Mourir de ne pas mourir Œuvres Complètes* I, 151: Sur la maison du rire/Un oiseau rit dans ses ailes./Le monde est si léger/Qu'il n'est plus à sa place/ Et si gai/Qu'il ne lui manque rien.

<sup>65</sup> I have used the original piano score here for simplicity. The flute solo was added by Messiaen when he orchestrated *Poèmes pour Mi* in 1937.

<sup>66</sup> Voyages and the horizon are frequent themes of Reverdy's poetry, as in *Départ* (*Les ardoises du toit*).

image of life without the beloved.<sup>67</sup> Even after the longed-for reconciliation of man with God [*Ne dite qu'une seule parole, et mon âme sera guérie*], paraphrased from the mass ordinary, and realisation of our predestination to imitate Christ in the final *Prière exaucée*, Messiaen ends the cycle with a near quote from the *Andante amoroso* (II) of Berg's *Lyric Suite* that seems more like a warning against worldly wiles than a celebration of joy's return (ex. 62).<sup>68</sup>

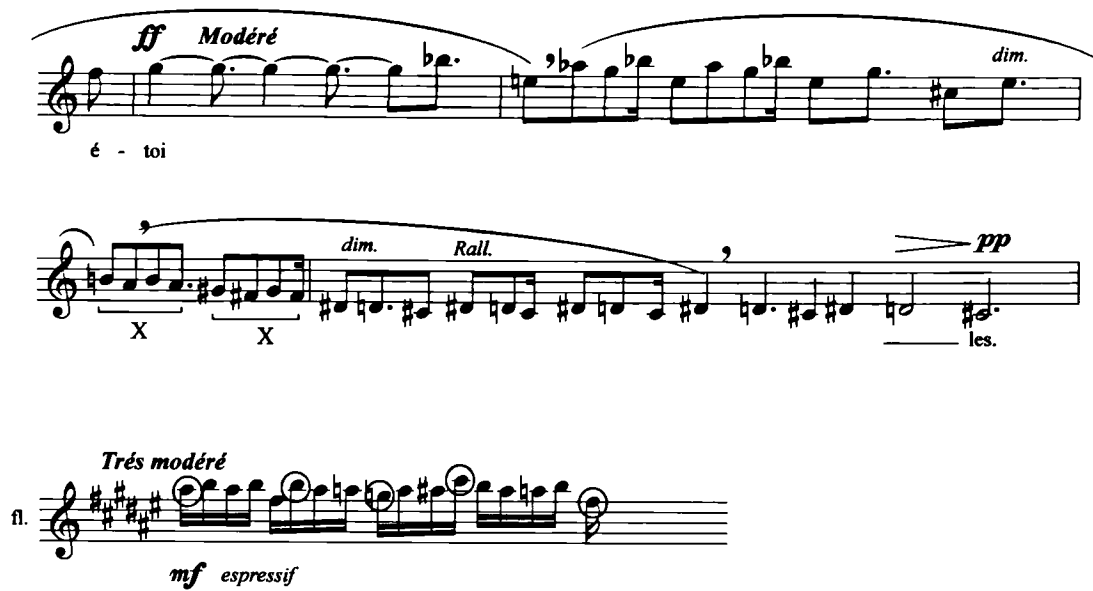
Despite such interesting conjunctions, it seems to me that the essential hidden presence in these songs is the symbol of the cross, familiar from the second bar of *Jésus accepte la souffrance* (*La Nativité du Seigneur*). This idea is present in every song, usually in the accompaniment. However, in the first song it is used to underline significant words: *transforme, unie, lumière, étoiles* and finally in the *Alleluia*:

**Ex. 94** Use of the Cross motive in *Action de grâces*



<sup>67</sup> Messiaen only got to know Berg's *Wozzeck* and his *Violin Concerto* after the war when Felix Aprahamian lent him copies of these works to analyse. Yet he knew the *Lyric Suite* by his thirtieth year and may have been analysing this work when he was orchestrating his *Poèmes pour Mi*.

<sup>68</sup> Op. Cit., *The Missal*, 30: 'Lord, I am not worthy that thou shouldst enter under my roof: but only say the word, and my soul shall be healed.' ('Domine non sum dignus est intres ... anima mea'). 'La joie est revenue'. Another quote occurs in *Le Collier* (song 8) at the words *Ah! mon collier! Ah mon collier*; strikingly reminiscent of the opening of the first of Debussy's *Ariettes Oubliées* (1885-87).



Messiaen uses the cross as a *fil conducteur* to make a connection between the redemptive love and suffering of Christ symbolised in the Cross, its transformative and unifying power (*transforme, unie*), images of eternity (*lumière, étoiles*), thankfulness (*Alleluia*), and human erotic spiritual love. The Cross becomes a lyrical symbol, an 'indispensable explosion of being dilated by emotion towards the exterior'.<sup>69</sup>

Such an explosive surrealist juxtaposition of religious sentiment and sensual eroticism was certainly a subversive pill that the audience and critics at the first performances of his *Trois Petites Liturgies de la Présence Divine*, at the *Concerts de la Pléiade* on 21 April 1945, were reluctant to swallow.<sup>70</sup> What could they have

<sup>69</sup> Op. Cit., Pierre Reverdy, *Le Gant de Crin*, 37.

<sup>70</sup> Rostand, Claude, *Olivier Messiaen* (Paris: Ventadour, 1957), 8-10. Rostand gives an account of the different factions' criticisms of Messiaen. Messiaen's letters to Denise Tual reveal the circumstances of this work's genesis, and are published in full (in English and French) in Nigel Simeone, 'Messiaen and the Concerts de la Pléiade: "A kind of clandestine resistance against the Occupation"', *Music and Letters* (November 2000), 551-84. On 22 September 1943,



found difficult about this piece, regarded by Messiaen as 'ma meilleure partition'?<sup>71</sup> Could it have been the stereotypical objectification of the 'eternal feminine' manifest in the sweet ethereal timbre of women's voices, divided at the most effective moments? Or could it have been the transparent vibraphone, translucent celesta or the sycophantic swooning of the Ondes Martenot (appearing here for the first time in one of his major orchestral compositions)?<sup>72</sup> Or could it have been the quasi-solo piano with its idiomatic imitation of birdsong colouring and juxtaposed with tonal chords, a technique that, even in the 1940s, begins to sound a little like pastiche Messiaen? Certainly all of the above and more: Messiaen was openly praising God in a secular environment through the most hedonist and erotic musical language, an issue that I have discussed in Chapter 1.<sup>73</sup> On top of this, the audience was subjected to the litanic (repetitive) quality of his verse and music that, in the spirit of ecclesiastical liturgy, recontextualises music and text in quasi-strophic forms and repeatedly confronts

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Messiaen accepted an invitation from Denise Tual to write another two-piano work 'dans la style, le genre est la durée de mes *Visions de l'Amen*'. But by 4 October 1943, he seems to have gone off the idea, saying that: 'J'ai peur de recommencer les *Visions de l'Amen* en moins bien'. He then states his preference for the *Liturgies*. In *TRCO*, Vol. VII, 193, Messiaen states that both Reverdy and Éluard were present at the first performance of the *Trois Petites Liturgies*.

<sup>71</sup> Messiaen wrote this in Felix Aprahamian's score at a concert in the Free Trade Hall in Manchester, on 10 December 1974.

<sup>72</sup> Messiaen had written the extended *Fêtes des belles eaux* in 1937 for the *Exposition Internationale des Arts et des Techniques appliqués à la Vie Moderne*. This work for 6 Ondes Martenots is one of the earliest pieces in the twentieth century to be composed specifically for electronic instruments. See Nigel Simeone's 'The Science of Enchantment', *The Musical Times*, Vol. 143 (Spring 2002), 9-17, for full details of this event.

<sup>73</sup> Messiaen stated his desire 'to achieve a liturgical act, that is to transport a sort of office, a sort of organised praise into the concert hall'. Claude Samuel *Entretiens avec Olivier Messiaen* (Paris: Belfond, 1967), 13-14 quoted in Griffiths, 112.

them, if not bombards them, with ideas *autour d'un message*. This message is that of Marmionesque predestination packaged in three movements:

**I:** *Antienne de la Conversation intérieure (Dieu présent en nous ...)*

**II:** *Séquence du Verbe, Cantique Divin (Dieu présent en lui-même ...)*

**III:** *Psalmodie de l'Ubiquité par amour (Dieu présent en toutes choses ...)*

In these pieces, the fine line between communication and doctrinaire propaganda is broached, if not breached, as Messiaen's Catholic faith is relentlessly driven down the throat of a twentieth-century secular audience, a far cry from the illusive physiognomy of divine love in *Poèmes pour Mi*. A sample of Messiaen's poetry will suffice to reveal the simplicity of his imagery:

Mon Jésus, mon silence,  
Restez en moi.  
Mon Jésus,  
Mon royaume de silence,  
Parlez en moi.  
Mon Jésus,  
Nuit d'arc-en-ciel et de silence,  
Priez en moi. ...

Chantez, lancez l'auréole d'amour,  
Mon Amour. ...

Louange de la Gloire à mes ailes de terre,  
Mon Dimanche, ma Paix, mon Toujours de lumière,  
Que le ciel parle en moi, rire, ange nouveau,  
Ne me réveillez pas: C'est le temps de l'oiseaux! ...

Mon Amour, Mon Dieu.

At once the Éluardian image of birds and the idea of a halo (*auréole*) are recognisable along with the notion of silence as an expression beyond language.<sup>74</sup>

Unlike in *Poèmes*, where he is mostly addressing his wife, God and by inference the individual, here his audacious attempt to confront the audience with their own lack of faith and human incompleteness was surely galling in its subversiveness. The onslaught is continued in the second piece, a sort of scherzo of 'mad love', which continues the predominant tonality of A major from the first 'liturgy'. In Messiaen's hands, this key has a bright sheen that has an almost narcissistic quality at the repetition of the music for *Mon Dieu*, from the first piece, at *Pour nous!* in the second:<sup>75</sup>

**Ex. 95 I** *Antienne de la Conversation intérieure (Dieu présent en nous ...)* [end],

**II** *Séquence du Verbe, Cantique Divin (Dieu présent en lui-même...)* [end]



<sup>74</sup> See Éluard's: *La courbe de tes yeux fait le tour de mon coeur, / Un rond de danse et de douceur, / Auréole du temps, berceau nocturne et sûr, / Et si je ne sais plus ce que j'ai vécu* C'est que tes yeux ne m'ont pas toujours vu. *Capitale de la douleur* (1926), *Œuvres Complètes* I, 196. For the idea of silence see Éluard's *L'amour la poésie* XXI: *Nos yeux renvoient la lumière / Et la lumière le silence / À ne plus se reconnaître / À survivre à l'absence*. Also XXIII which begins: *Voyage du silence / De mes mains à tes yeux ...* *Œuvres Complètes* I, 238-9.

<sup>75</sup> A major is used at the crucial cathartic moment in Messiaen's opera *St Françoise d'Assise* where the Angel sings to Francis: 'Your heart accuses you, but God is greater than your heart'; the moment that marks both the transformation of the leper and the 'crowning act of saintliness' in Francis's life. See Samuel, *Op. Cit.*, 225.

Again, as in the final movement of *L'Ascension*, Messiaen seems caught in the reflection of his own image. The music becomes not only a reflection of divine love, but of his own earnestness to communicate his faith. In this there was an obvious danger that Messiaen was portraying himself as 'holier than thou' to the public. This is an all too evident by-product of Messiaen's fervency that is manifested in the use of surreal images to conjure up the actuality of God's love:

La montagne saute comme une brebis,  
Et devient un grand océan.  
Imprimez votre nom dans mon sang<sup>76</sup> ...

L'unique oiseau de l'Eternité, c'est vous!  
Elles s'alignent lentement, les cloches de la profondeur,  
Posez-vous comme un sceau sur mon cœur.

'Set yourself as a seal on my heart': it was this last line that particularly stuck in people's throats.<sup>77</sup> The juxtaposition of evangelism and surrealism finds parallels in the juxtaposition of christianity and eroticism, modes and 'tonality' and the interlacing of *personnages rythmiques*, all worn like a badge of honour on his arm in this his 'meilleur partition'.<sup>78</sup>

This work provides one of the clearest statement in Messiaen's output of the desire to bring a mirror to 'fallen humanity', and through the litanic repetition of

<sup>76</sup> This final image is strikingly similar to that used by Éluard at the end of the poem quoted above in the text 'La courbe de tes yeux ...' which ends: 'Et tout mon sang coule dans leurs regards.' See *Capitale de la douleur, Œuvres Complètes* I, 196.

<sup>77</sup> Op. Cit., Goléa, 49. This line is taken from 'The Song of Solomon', 8:6, 'Set me as a seal upon thine heart, as a seal upon thine arm: for love is strong as death ...', *The Bible*, King James Authorised Version (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 651. See *TRCO*, Vol. VII, 213.

<sup>78</sup> See Cheong Wai-Ling, 'Messiaen's Triadic Colouration: Modes as Interversion', *Music Analysis*, Volume 21, no.1 (March 2002), 53-84. See especially her diagram of modal superimposition on p. 60 (*Psalmodie de l'ubiquité par amour*, p. 134-6).

Catholic doctrine, to precipitate an awareness, a cathartic transformation and redemption of humanity. Beauty (in Breton's sense) is convulsive in its violent opposition to the mundaneness of modernity. Messiaen's *liturgies* therefore remind us that his Christian mission may be as relevant today as in 1945.

### III

When asked in 1962 by Samuel what advice he would give to an enthusiast who was coming to hear one of his works that would be difficult at first hearing, Messiaen said that the public must come with no 'a priorisms', and with a sort of 'aural virginity' [*virginité d'oreille*]. The interviewer then asks:

"He must hear a shock?"

Messiaen (emphatically): "Yes! A Shock!"<sup>79</sup>

The lyric intensity, complementary juxtaposition and rupture of heterogeneous inferences that outraged the audience and critics of *Trois Petites Liturgies* marks a first high-water mark of a burgeoning tendency in Messiaen's early music. In *Les Eaux de la Grâce* and *L'Ange aux parfums* from *Les Corps Glorieux* (1939), rupture quite literally occurs at the ends of these pieces which just stop, their *idées* having exhausted themselves. In the final work of this cycle, *Le Mystère de la Sainte Trinité*, a palliative to any sort of heroic ending, the abstract recontextualising of the *personnages* likewise 'runs out', prefiguring the two large trio pieces of the *Livre*

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<sup>79</sup> *Entretien avec Olivier Messiaen*, 11-13 October 1962 included with a recording of his *Turangalila-Symphonie*, Vega 30 BVG 1363. Samuel: "Il doit entendre un choc?", Messiaen: "Oui! Un choc!"

*d'Orgue* (1951), which use Hindu rhythms as *personnages*, in their surrealist attitude of *disponibilité*.

However, it is the liberation of ornamentation in *La Nativité, Les Corps Glorieux* and the *Quatuor pour la fin du Temps* that mark these pieces out as transitional works. In these works dissonance is freed from the need to be wholly accountable to Messiaen's modes. One need only turn in *Chants de Terre et de Ciel* (1939) to the *Antienne du Silence* to see the controlled irrationality implicit in the piano part that counterpoints the relatively stable F major modality of the voice by weaving its dissonance with abandon.<sup>80</sup> One could also cite the use of glissandi in the following song *Danse du bébé-Pilule*, with its use of invented words and its mixture of surrealist images (*C'est l'alphabet du rire aux doigts de ta maman*) and symbolist images (*son oui perpétuel était un lac tranquille*).<sup>81</sup> In these songs gesture is slowly becoming the most evident feature, expanding the significance of Messiaen's employment of Éluardian iconography, familiar from *Poèmes*. For instance, the opening of *Arc-en-ciel d'innocence* prefigures that of *Regard sur la Vierge* (no XI of the *Vingt Regards*), as well as *Amour oiseaux d'étoile* (*Harawi* no.10), in its technique of colouring tonal (or modal) chords with dissonance that refers to and defers from the consonances in the bass. Like an artist painting over fresh primary colours to effect new colours, Messiaen's technique engenders new significance by its juxtaposition, as in Lautréamont's juxtaposition of an umbrella and a sewing machine that Breton so admired, to engender an analogous image of a rainbow:

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<sup>80</sup> Compare this to the end of *Action de grâces* (*Poèmes pour Mi*) where the pattern is not dissimilar, but more strongly rooted in F# major.

<sup>81</sup> See Verlaine's *Nevermore* that uses *oui* as an image of spiritual and sexual consent: 'Le premier oui qui sort de lèvres bien-aimées.'

Ex. 96 *Arc-en-ciel d'innocence* (opening)

The musical score for the opening of *Arc-en-ciel d'innocence* is presented for voice and piano. The tempo is marked 'Modéré'. The voice part (CHANT) begins with a melodic line on the lyrics 'Pi-lu-le, tu t'é-ti-res'. The piano part (PIANO) features a complex, dissonant chordal texture with a triplet of eighth notes in the bass line. The score is marked with 'mf' (mezzo-forte) and includes dynamic markings like '11' and '3'.

This proves a good example of the way Messiaen uses resonance, which becomes a tendentious rationalisation of dissonance in *TMLM*.<sup>82</sup> Rather than trying to reduce dissonance to the harmonic series, through the acciaccatura technique for instance, it seems to me that Messiaen rather missed an opportunity to explain dissonance in itself as a colourful metaphor for God in *TMLM*, another modernist aspect of his discourse.<sup>83</sup> This after all is what his music begins to indicate from the late 1930s. Indeed, by the time Messiaen was writing the *Quatuor*, through the major works of Chagall, Dufy, Kandinsky and Matisse, not to mention Miró, Tanguy, Lam, Dali and other 'surrealist painters' (categorised by Breton), colour has become a well-established metaphor for the resonant spiritual life of the artist.<sup>84</sup> If such a resonant

<sup>82</sup> Some features of these songs provide stylistic continuity. Images of nature, birds (*tous les oiseaux légers* and Éluardian *auréoles* in song 2), light and bells along with technical aspects such as the parlante style from Debussy's *Pelléas* (in *Arc-en-ciel* and in the final song *Résurrection*), tremolandi and 6-4 chords (in *Minuit pile et face*) are all used in much the same way as in *Poèmes pour Mi*.

<sup>83</sup> In not mentioning this aspect of his music, Messiaen again shows a desire to limit the significance of his music's modernist discourse.

<sup>84</sup> These are some of the painters that Breton tries to fit under his surrealist umbrella in *Surrealism and Painting*, Op. Cit. Messiaen mentions that he was reading this work at the time of composing his 'Tristan trilogy'. Op. Cit., Goléa, 155. More specifically, Dufy's technique of

spiritual life can be intuited as resulting from the presence of Christ, then colour has a Christological significance that for Messiaen is intrinsically surrealist.

This *disponibilité* is an essential component of a new improvisatory style which inaugurates a radical reconfiguration of musical elements. In works such as *Abîme des Oiseaux* (*Quatuor pour la fin du Temps*) or in the bird sections of *Regard des hauteurs* (*Vingt Regards* no. 8), Messiaen's music becomes much more reliant, as indicated in Chapter 2, on spacing, register, timbral contrast, rhythm and the rhetoric of his phrases or *personnages* to carry his musical narrative.<sup>85</sup> Harmony becomes the 'first amongst equals' that may have a controlling hand but that need not be played all the time.

This engenders a more truly surrealist music than in *Poèmes pour Mi* for instance because gesture is freed from the need to be accountable to harmony. In this, the naïve pictorialism of *L'Ascension* and *La Nativité* begins to find its harvest home, even as all the while, this new radicalism is subject to Messiaen's Christian mission of reconfiguring the world through art. Thus for instance in a piece such as *Par Lui tout a été fait* (VI from *Vingt Regards*), the counterpoint that one might expect from a fugue becomes deracinated (from harmony). Instead timbre, texture and form take over the depiction of 'The Word' [*Le Verbe*] as the origin of the 'Expansion of spaces and durations; galaxies, photons, contrary spirals, inverse lightnings ...'.<sup>86</sup>

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painting the outline of shapes and then putting colour over the top of them, has a remarkable resonance in the first movement of the *Quatuor*, where a pedal of 29 chords in the piano is recontextualised, allowing the clarinet, violin and cello to add their *personnages*-like commentary on top (see Chapter 5). Such superimposition of dissonance announces a new *disponibilité* that is of paramount importance to the eschatological poetics of this work.

<sup>85</sup> This can also be observed in the central bird section of *Communion* (*Les oiseaux et les sources*) [*Messe de la Pentecôte*], or in the *interventions* at the start of *Île de Feu* 2 (1950).

<sup>86</sup> From Messiaen's epigraph for *Par Lui tout a été fait*.



The form of the fugue aspires to 'render continuous' the 'hysterical, modern, surrealist and phenomenal' aspects of this Christian image of creation.<sup>87</sup> Under the burden of gesturalism the 'exposition' of the fugue breaks down and becomes a rhythmic canon, like those used in *Turangalila-Symphonie* (1946-48) and in *Le merle noir* (1952) that, in taking its *raison d'être* from the 'subject' (in stretto), functions as a sort of episode. Fugal devices in this work, in the absence of any controlling tonality, become like the *objets trouvailles* of the helmet and spoon that André Breton discovers while walking around a flea market with Alberto Giacometti.<sup>88</sup> The serendipity of finding these objects, such as the 'subject', and their change in 'associative and interpretative qualities' (throughout the fugue), when the spoon is brought back to Breton's house, are, for Breton, allegories of the serendipitous encounter of another being, and the love that will change life.<sup>89</sup> Moreover, throughout *Vingt Regards*, leitmotives attempt to impart some sort of organic meaning to the work while acting as contextualised *objets trouvés* in Messiaen's fantastical musical language which contains some of most remarkable effects yet produced from a piano. Witness for example, the sort of wild convulsive lava flows that occur in *Regard de l'Esprit de joie* (X):

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<sup>87</sup> Dali, Salvador, in Paul Éluard en collaboration avec André Breton, 'Dictionnaire abrégé du surréalisme' (1938), Op. Cit., 743.

<sup>88</sup> Op. Cit., Breton, *Mad Love*, note 17, p. 125: 'L'objet trouvé is of course the *trouvaille*, the thing found and always turned towards the positive, seeming at once surprising and necessary.'

<sup>89</sup> See section 3 of Breton's *Mad Love*, Op. Cit., 25-38.

Ex. 97 *Regard de l'Esprit de joie* b. 38

Note in this regard the extreme use of tessitura in the naïve 'tam-tam' pedal (using the bottom three notes of the piano that symbolise 'the Word supporting all things' in *La parole toute puissante* (XII), and the ensuing hammer, bell and xylophone affects to symbolise the joy of Christ's incarnation in *Noël* (XIII).<sup>90</sup> Such images are contrasted with the radiant intimacy of F# major in *Le baiser de l'Enfant Jésus* (XV) and *Je dors, mais mon cœur veille* (XIX) where the sleeping Christ is presented as a metaphor for his 'presence' in the communion and, in this, as a refuge from the world respectively.<sup>91</sup> Messiaen's juxtaposition of Christian doctrine and musical pictorialism is like Reverdy's surrealist opposition of images. It is designed to provoke an emotion - a cathartic response to the presence of Christ.

Surrealist paroxysms reach their apogee in the ten movement *Turangalila-Symphonie*, the central work of Messiaen's 'Tristan-trilogy'.<sup>92</sup> At the time of writing these works, Messiaen's first wife Claire Delbos was going insane, while his

<sup>90</sup> See the epigraph for *La parole toute-puissante*: 'Cet enfant est le Verbe qui soutient toutes choses par la puissance de sa parole ...'

<sup>91</sup> See the epigraph for *Je dors, mais mon cœur veille*: 'Ce n'est pas d'un ange 'archet qui sourit, \_c'est Jésus dormant qui nous aime dans son Dimanche et nous donne l'oubli ...'

<sup>92</sup> A precedent for a symphony of this size had already been set by Charles Tournemire's *Symphonie no. 7* Op. 49 'Les danses de la vie' (1921). Messiaen may have known about, but not heard, this work which, in its five movements, lasts an hour and a quarter.

increased attraction to the young pianist and future wife, Yvonne Loriod, was evidently a great moral dilemma for such a devout Catholic. Messiaen's 'Tristan' cycle concentrates on the emotion that results from the conjunction of images (in a surrealist sense) - the spiritual, emotional and physical struggle with overcoming the opposition to forbidden human love is sublimated in a celebration of divine love. Messiaen takes Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, where death is the consummation of love beyond the evils of the world, one stage further to make it into a mytho-allegory of the constancy of eternal love beyond the grave. One would not have to be a practising psychologist to realise that his 'trilogy' was a creative necessity, a panacea to the spleen of his dying love and the appeasement of guilt at his burgeoning new paramour.<sup>93</sup> In *Mad Love*, Breton offers this comforting olive branch:

Is the mirror of a love between two beings likely to be clouded over by the very fact of circumstances totally foreign to love and to be unclouded, suddenly when the circumstances cease? Yes.<sup>94</sup>

More poignantly, Breton himself uses a 'Tristan' allegory in his exegesis of love:

Death, whence the grandfather clock bedecked with country flowers, as beautiful as my tombstone and stood on its end, will start up again on tiptoe to sing the hours not passing. For a man and a woman, who, at the end of time, must be you and me, will glide along, when it is their turn, without ever looking back, as far as the path leads, in the oblique light, at the edge of life and of the oblivion of life, in the delicate grass running before us to its

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<sup>93</sup> Describing the period before her marriage to Messiaen in 1962, Loriod stated: 'So we cried. We cried for 20 years until she died and [we] could marry. Claire Delbos died in 1959, so the period referred to is 1939-59. 'Her maître's voice', Yvonne Loriod-Messiaen interviewed by Michael White in *The Independent on Sunday*, 10 January 1999.

<sup>94</sup> Op. Cit., *Mad Love*, 110.

arborescence. It is composed, this lacy grass, of a thousand invisible, unbreakable links, which happen to chain your nervous system with mine in the deepest night of knowledge. This ship, rigged by hands of children, exhausts the bobbin of fate. It is this grass which will continue after me to line the walls of the humblest room each time two lovers enclose themselves, scorning everything that can happen, even the approach of the end of their lives. No rock, no matter how high it reaches, no rock threatening to fall each second, can keep this grass from becoming so dense and around the bed as to hide the rest of the world from two gazes seeking each other and losing each other.<sup>95</sup>

For Breton, as for Messiaen, the grave has no victory nor is there any sting in death, but only a metaphysical change of appearance. In Messiaen's 'Tristan' cycle, the psychological, erotic darkness of night is used as a necessary precursor to the new day: a Christian symbol of redemption where souls will pass beyond the sullied foibles of human eroticism to a divine love. The dreaded flight to reality in Wagner's opera, a topos that can be found *par excellence* in Huysmans's novel *A rebours*, becomes the longed-for new dawn, a symbol of new love and light not only for *les amants*, but for all humanity.

It was this surrealist conjunction of Christianity and eroticism that aroused the ire of his audience. At the first French performance of *Turangalîla*, the critic Felix Aprahamian found Georges Auric and Francis Poulenc in a furious argument over the piece; the former was 'for it' and the latter 'against it'. What had aroused them to such antimony was the *Jardin du sommeil d'amour* (VI) and the *Joie du sang des étoiles* (V). Looking back on the work's reception, Messiaen stated:

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<sup>95</sup> Op. Cit, *Mad Love*, 82.

The prudes found it sensual, the dodecaphonists find it tonal: they considered these two adjectives injurious! ... The general public has always applauded it with all its heart. It is not mistaken: not only have I never written anything livelier, more dynamic, and more violently *amoureux*, but there is a search and a complexity in the rhythmic work which should have been ultimately interesting to technicians.<sup>96</sup>

Most importantly, in a surrealist sense, the work had aroused a strong emotion.

*Turangalila* implies love that is 'a super human joy, overflowing, blind and unlimited', inculcating Breton's ideal that: 'Convulsive beauty will be veiled-erotic, fixed-explosive, magic-circumstantial, or it will not be'.<sup>97</sup> The quasi-Stravinskian gyration of *personnages rythmiques*, the superimposition of mode and the *style oiseau*, the use of leitmotives as *objets trouvailles*, the extreme timbres and fortissimos of the orchestra, fortified by the percussion and the Ondes Martenot, all engender an onomatopoeia of spiritual and erotic consummation. *Turangalila-Symphonie* represents one of the *points sublimes* of his art that necessitated the search for other avenues of expression such as the *Mode de valeurs et d'intensités* (1949) and the musique-concrète piece *Timbres-durées* (1952).<sup>98</sup>

In one of Messiaen's favourite books of this period, *Surrealism and Painting*, Breton quotes Chirico as saying in 1913: 'To be really immortal a work of art must go completely beyond the limits of the human, to where good sense and logic are absent.

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<sup>96</sup> *TRCO*, Vol. II, 235.

<sup>97</sup> *TRCO*, Vol. II, 151. Op. Cit., André Breton, *Mad Love*, 19.

<sup>98</sup> *Timbres-durées* (1952), realised by Pierre Henry, is a very interesting piece in many ways. Messiaen uses recordings of natural sounds such as pouring water, plays these backwards and forwards, plays with reverberation and cuts the tape to get the durations he wants. The effect of the piece is of changing asymmetrical durations of noises that are not entirely without pitch

In this way it will come close to the dream and to the mentality of childhood'.<sup>99</sup> Such a mentality is intimated in the surrealist phantasmagoria of *Turangalila*, where atmosphere and gestural affect, aspiring towards colour, are preferenced over form and texture.

Gesture reaches another extreme in Messiaen's *Cinq Rechants* (1948).

Messiaen states that:

The Poem, conceived at the same time as the music, is a love poem. It is written in French, in a surrealist style approximating that of Paul Éluard. It is in an invented language, of which each syllable, whilst chosen for its timbre, facilitates [*pour mettre en valeur*] the musical rhythm. The vocal writing, caressing and soft or furiously passionate, further expresses the Union of the two lovers.<sup>100</sup>

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content. One senses a melody of timbres and durations; a concern that would find fruition in the strophes of *Chronochromie* for example.

<sup>99</sup> Op. Cit., Breton, *Surrealism and Painting*, footnote p. 18.

<sup>100</sup> *TRCO*, Vol. I, 355. Messiaen seems to have tried to imitate the orthography and style of Éluard's *Poésie ininterrompue* (1946) [example below from *Œuvres Complètes* II, 36] which, in the central section of *Cinq Rechants*, juxtaposes ideas in successive two-line stanzas. As in Reverdy's doctrine of the 'image', Éluard's 'réalités' are 'lointain et juste' to engender stronger images and emotions:

Sur les champs un ciel étroit  
Soc du néant sur les tombes

Au tournant les chiens hurlant  
Vers une carcasse folle

Au tournant l'eau est crépue  
Et les champs claquent des dents

Et les chiens sont des torchons  
Léchant des vitres brisées

Sur les champs la puanteur  
Roule noire et bien musclée

Messiaen opposes and contrasts predominately angular lines in an atonal idiom and with his own modes for particularly affective moments. Stylistically, the allusion to troubadour music (that of Jaufré Rudel and Folquet de Marseille), Le Jeune's *Printemps*, Machaut's polyphony, plainchant, Hindu and Greek rhythms create a surrealist juxtaposition of ideas. In this work, recontextualisation is focussed less on the similitude of ideas than on their metaphoric disjuncture, which serves both to disguise the form and poetically intimate the *disponibilité* and serendipity of love. By such a conjunction Messiaen is able to 'illuminate things with his mind and cast its reflection on other minds'.<sup>101</sup>

*Cinq Rechants* is a prophetic work and marks a high-water mark in Messiaen's transformation of the discourse of modernity.<sup>102</sup> The sort of conflict and

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Sur le ciel tout ébréché  
Les étoiles sont moisies etc.

Other images from Éluard's poetry can be found throughout *Cinq Rechants*, like the 'earth fan unfurled', as an image of the primacy of woman. The images of the wheels and fan are used in Éluard's 'Première du monde' (*Capitale de la douleur*) as images of the world and its disposition respectively (Éluard, *Œuvres Complètes* I, 178). The image of the wheel is central to *Les yeux dans les Roues* (*Livre d'Orgue* no. 6) where wild continual semiquavers evoke Ezekiel's vision of 'a whirlwind, a great cloud of fire, the noise of high water, four living quadriformes [creatures with four heads, four wings, etc.] running in every direction like lightning, extraordinary wheels, living, filled with eyes all around, which look at and spin with the wheels ... Among all these symbols of the deity, 'the spirit of the living being' is designated the Holy Spirit: the piece is therefore played on the day of Pentecost.' Messiaen's note accompanying the piece, trans. Jon Gillock in the liner notes for Louis Thiry's recording of the work, Jade CD 74321 30296-2. The surrealism of this work is underlined by Messiaen in Goléa (Op. Cit.). Messiaen states that this work 'pourrait être signé André Breton ou Max Ernst, qui ne passent pas spécialement pour des Catholiques ...', 39.

<sup>101</sup> Op. Cit., Baudelaire, 'The Salon of 1859', 309. The original quote is '... there are the imaginative ones who say: "I want to illuminate things with my mind and cast its reflection on other minds".'

complementation of images seem to encapsulate perfectly the Éluardian notion of lyricism as a '*développement d'une protestation*', a protestation as much as a panacea, in Messiaen, against a world indifferent to the transfigurative power of love.<sup>103</sup>

Messiaen states that his song cycle *Harawi* 'enacts an irresistible and profoundly passionate love, that lasts until the end of the lovers' lives, as in the story of Tristan and Isolde. Here Isolde is called Piroutcha'.<sup>104</sup> In fact the cycle is as much concerned with their death as with their union in the life thereafter. *Harawi* was inspired by a surrealist painting by Roland Penrose called *L'Île Invisible* (1937), reproduced in the Parisian magazine *Minotaure* as *Seeing is Believing* in issue no. 10, Winter 1937 [Fig. 3].<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Although Messiaen knew Poulenc's cantata *Un soir de neige* (1944), because he heard it at the concert on 10/5/45 at which his *Trois Petites Liturgies* was performed for the first time, and the complex *Figure Humaine* (1943) both on poems of Éluard, neither of these works match the contrapuntal dexterity of Messiaen's *Cinq Rechants*, which looks forward to works such as Ligeti's *Aventures* (1962) and *Nouvelle Aventures* (1962-5).

<sup>103</sup> Éluard, Paul, 'Notes sur la poésie en collaboration avec Andre Breton (1936), *Œuvres Complètes* I, 477.

<sup>104</sup> Op. Cit., Rostand. Facsimile of a letter from Messiaen to Rostand, inserted between p. 16 and 17. 'Il s'agit d'un amour irrésistible et profondiment passionné, qui va jusqu'à la mort des deux amants: comme dans l'histoire de Tristan et Yseult. Ici, Yseult s'appelle 'Piroutcha'.'

<sup>105</sup> Messiaen describes but does not name this painting in Goléa, Op. Cit., 155-56. In a conversation with the painter's son on 11 June 2003, Anthony Penrose confirmed that Penrose did not have a preference for either title of this painting (currently lost), and that the work dates from 1937. He informed me that it belongs to a period of creative work inspired by Lee Miller, and that it relates closely to an *objet d'art*: *The Dew Machine* (1937). Furthermore: 'Penrose rarely commented on what his work was about', and he had a 'passion for women and nature'. There is no known extant correspondence between Penrose and Messiaen. See Roland Penrose, *Scrapbook (1900-1981)* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1981), 91, for a reproduction of *Seeing is Believing* or *L'Île Invisible*. For a reproduction of *The Dew Machine*, see Anthony Penrose, *Roland Penrose: The Friendly Surrealist* (London: Prestel, 2001), 51.



What could have caught Messiaen's eye here? Could it have been the hands, outstretched as though to receive the sacrament? One hand is opaque, as though compromised by the dark satanic mills of modernity pictured above them. Or could it have been the woman who, from her expression, seems to signify a spiritual and visionary domain. As an irrational being (presented upside down), she provides a portal for man's redemption and a vision of eternity beyond the storm clouds of war and human conflict.

Such an eschatological telos is intimated in the song cycle by a diversity of material and images. Throughout *Harawi*, musical interest is reliant upon the repetition and intensification as much as the diversification of gesture that is taken to its zenith in the onomatopoeic mantras of *Doundou tchil* (IV) and *Syllabes* (VIII).

The brittle music of *Montagnes* serves as a reminder of the abyss of love and death (an allegory of modernity's indifference), and contrasts with the epiphenomenal bird fantasies of *Bonjour toi, colombe verte* that iconicise images of the natural world as a reflection of the greater divine love of God.<sup>106</sup> Images of time, the sky, deserts, the sun, birds, water and death (*l'escalier redit, gestes du soleil* [IX]) and the invocation of primitive dance rites (*Doundou tchil* [IV] and *Répétition planétaire* [VI]) are grist for Messiaen's myth-making mill and, in their conjunction, engender a new (surrealist) reality for the lovers in death.

Indeed lines like 'Ta tête à l'envers sous le ciel', and finally 'Mes mains, ton œil, ton cou, le ciel' have a direct eschatological topos and, considering the lines from

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<sup>106</sup> This notion of the abyss as an image of the irrational world is propagated in Reverdy's 'Abîme' (*Les ardoises du toit I*), 178. The title *Bonjour toi, colombe verte*, seems to be a hybrid image derived both from Cécile Sauvage's *amande verte* in 'Enfant, pâle embryon' from *L'Âme en*

*Harawi* printed in the order of service for Messiaen's funeral, there can be little doubt about Messiaen's interpretation of Penrose:

Ex. 98 from *Amour oiseaux d'étoile*



Below this, Messiaen is quoted:

After death, during the necessary purification that precedes the definitive vision of God, one cannot remember the joys and pains of this life. One remembers only the good and bad actions. At this moment, I will be upset with all evil that I have done. But, I will also rejoice in all the good I have been able to do, and this final memory permits me progressively to understand at last the invisible.<sup>107</sup>

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*bourgeon* (1908), and Éluard's 'À peine défigurée' (*La vie immédiate*) [1932], made famous by Poulenc's setting. *Œuvres Complètes* I, 365

<sup>107</sup> Order of service for Messiaen's funeral 14 May 1992. My thanks to Mr Dennis Hunt for supplying me with a copy of this document.

Messiaen's hope to join his 'birds of the stars' free at last from the world's torment is a clear statement of his faith in the hereafter. In the final song (*Dans le noir*) the 'toi' from the first song has vanished. The lovers, as in *La Mort du Nombre*, are now beyond their mortal coil; a death-wish and a fervent hope for his wife and himself.

Throughout Messiaen's trilogy and particularly in *Harawi*, Messiaen himself is implicitly autobiographically present, and yet absent in the objectification of images. In attempting to take on the Éluardian mantle of the 'poet that inspires rather than who is inspired', he seems to be attempting to inspire himself to action in order to forget the circumstances of his wife's health.<sup>108</sup> The listener becomes an eavesdropper on a form of private self-therapy.

Hearing and comprehension enter into the domain of fragmentary apperception, commensurate with the symbolist notion of synaesthesia, which attempts to confuse the senses and create a *bouleversement de l'âme*, rather than overthrow one hierarchy for another.<sup>109</sup> Messiaen's rush of oneiric images is designed to overwhelm cathartically the conscious mind and thereby lead humanity to 'another reality'. This is the *point sublime* towards which Messiaen is aiming in these works: a point of departure and a recognition that love and life was before him - the promise of each coming hour unravelling 'life's whole secret, perhaps about to be revealed one day, possibly in another being'.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Éluard, Paul, 'L'évidence poétique' (1937), *Œuvres Complètes* I, 515.

<sup>109</sup> Jay, Martin, *Downcast eyes: the denigration of vision in twentieth-century French thought* (Berkeley: University of California, 1993), 178.

<sup>110</sup> Op. Cit., Breton, *Mad Love*, 42.

**Fig. 4** Robert Delaunay *Rhythm, Joie de Vivre* (1930)



## Chapter 5: Of Colour, Improvisation and Birdsong

Art does not reproduce the invisible; rather, it makes visible.<sup>1</sup>

In my religion, we believe in the reality of the invisible and we believe in the resurrection of the flesh, the resurrection of the dead.<sup>2</sup>

But the birds are more important than the tempi, and the colours more important than the birds. More important than all the rest is the aspect of the invisible.<sup>3</sup>

Christ alone is the way and he is invisible.<sup>4</sup>

Christ was born to lead us from the visible to the love of the invisible [*à l'amour invisible*].<sup>5</sup>

For Olivier Messiaen, it is clear that the function of music is to make the invisible audible; to bring his faith to humanity. This is founded on the great hope of

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<sup>1</sup> Klee, Paul (1879-1940). '*Kunst gibt nicht das Sichtbare wieder, sondern macht sichtbar*'. From *Inward Vision* (1958), *Creative Credo* (1920), cited in the *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, ed. Angela Partington (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 402.

<sup>2</sup> Op. Cit., LWT, 10.

<sup>3</sup> Messiaen's preface to *Un Vitrail et des Oiseaux* (1986).

<sup>4</sup> Merton, Thomas, *Contemplative Prayer* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1973), 115. Merton is often cited by Messiaen as one of his great influences. There is a well-known picture of Messiaen near the summit of Mt Galibier reading one of Merton's books, reprinted in the programme for Messiaen's funeral on 14 May 1992.

<sup>5</sup> Ide, Père Pascal, 'Messiaen Théologien?', Programme for *St François d'Assise*, December 1992, 80. Ide is probably quoting St Thomas Aquinas here.

Christianity that one day after death we will be resurrected in Christ and that only then shall we 'know even as also I am known'.<sup>6</sup> Through his synaesthesia, colour was a way of making the invisible presence of God tangible. Although we may not be able to hear Messiaen's music in the same way, in his writings and in his music he encourages us to hear the degree of harmonic (and timbral) dissonance as commensurate with colour. Through a discussion of certain pieces I will show how Messiaen gradually broke free of the sort of 'school forms' in his earliest music to allow form and style to correspond more closely to his ideal of colour and its movement.

Colour is present in Messiaen's modes (harmony), but it relies on his rhythm to facilitate its movement. In particular Messiaen speaks of *personnages rythmiques* as being like the interlacing planes and colours that Robert (1885-1941) and Sonia Delaunay (née Turk) (1885-1979) talk about in relation to their paintings. Perhaps even more importantly, Messiaen was a friend of Sonia Delaunay and may have met her husband Robert during the *Exposition Internationale des Arts et des Techniques appliqués à la Vie Moderne*.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, colour for the Delaunays and Messiaen has a modern, spiritual and even transfigurative role that links their art.

In the second part this chapter I step back from this to examine Messiaen's pedagogical background in organ improvisation, and how form and style changed in Messiaen's output to correspond more closely to a certain ideal of colour. By doing

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<sup>6</sup> St Paul's first letter to the Corinthians 13:12.

<sup>7</sup> For this Messiaen composed his *Fête des belles eaux* for 6 Ondes Martenots. See Nigel Simeone's 'The Science of Enchantment', Op. Cit., 9-17. Robert Delaunay had been commissioned to decorate the Air and Railroad Pavillions; Sonia undertook three immense murals in the former and one in the latter. See the exhibition catalogue for *Sonia Delaunay: A Retrospective* (New York: The Buffalo Fine Arts Academy, 1980), 8.

this I hope to reveal how Messiaen's thinking about improvisation complements his Christian mission of transforming the world through music.

Finally I attempt to connect the ideas of colour and birdsong together in my discussion of birdsong. If colour and dissonance are interchangeable concepts then the introduction of birdsong into Messiaen's music heralds an unprecedented dissonance and therefore colour in his music. For Messiaen birds are at once both the greatest improvisers (and therefore entail practical and theological dimensions for him) and the source of dissonance and colour in music (especially in the way Messiaen uses them in quasi-*personnage* structures that connect birdsong to the thought of the Delaunays). Most importantly for him, they represent the voice of God in nature. Birdsong for Messiaen is therefore deeply symbolic, theological, musical, and a way of instilling a richer and more complex modernism in his music while transfiguring this through his religious aesthetics.

## I Colour

Late in life Messiaen spoke of the first time he visited the Ste-Chapelle in Paris: 'I was a very little boy - I must have been about eleven years old - and I was overwhelmed by the colours. I think that it was then that I understood that music was coloured.'<sup>8</sup> Messiaen then goes on to relate how the effect of the colours, which dazzle the eye, is like the effect of colours in chords. As I have already mentioned, Messiaen's synaesthesia meant that he saw colours when he heard music: 'I see not

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<sup>8</sup> Op. Cit., LWT, 19. In *TRCO* Vol. VII, Messiaen states that he was 'around 10 years old' (p. 7), '10 years old' (p. 98), and 'around the age of 10 ½' (p. 138) when he first visited the Ste-Chapelle.

with my eyes, but inside my head, the corresponding colours.’<sup>9</sup> Therefore early in life, through the catalyst of the Ste-Chapelle which he describes as ‘... probably the summit of what one can call religious art’, Messiaen linked in his mind the idea of music and colour.<sup>10</sup> The colour of windows was therefore a tangible metaphor for the radiance of God, a radiance that for Messiaen was latent in all mankind awaiting the catalyst of music.<sup>11</sup>

In his *Conférence de Notre-Dame* (1977), Messiaen states that:

... in my opinion, one does not fully understand music if one has not often experienced these two phenomena:

-complimentary colours

-natural resonance of sounding bodies<sup>12</sup>

Under the heading of ‘Sound Colour and Dazzlement’ he describes the effect of the windows of the Ste-Chapelle, the ‘simultaneous contrast’ in paintings and tapestries of Robert and Sonia Delaunay, the extreme synaesthesia of his friend Charles Blanc-Gatti, and the experience of complimentary colours.<sup>13</sup> A year later, Messiaen links colour with his spirituality:

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<sup>9</sup> Op. Cit., LWT, 20.

<sup>10</sup> Op. Cit., LWT, 20. Perhaps he also recognised the catechetical nature of the windows, which deal with the events of Christ’s life, which was to infuse his art.

<sup>11</sup> This is one of the meanings of his opera *St François d’Assise* discussed in Chapter 6.

<sup>12</sup> Op. Cit., Rössler, 62.

<sup>13</sup> On p. 158 of Dominique Bosseur’s article ‘Olivier Messiaen’ in *Musique de Notre Temps* (Paris: Casselman, 1973), she claims that ‘in 1931, under the influence of the painter Blanc-Gatti, he [Messiaen] established a series of correspondences of tonalities and nuances between sound and



When I hear music, when I read music, I see colours, which are marvellous and impossible to describe because they are moving like the sounds themselves, and as the durations are in movement, these are the things that move and which interpenetrate. One is not able to write them down, but one is dazzled [*ébloui*]. And it is this dazzling which brings us closer to a leap beyond time, to a leaving of oneself that will be eternity.<sup>14</sup>

Here again Messiaen is contrasting mortal time with eternal God (see Chapter 3), but more than this, he is proposing that the movement and interpenetration of sounds and colours [known as the *sons-couleurs* relationship] is the source of music's ability to transform humanity and bring us closer to God. Messiaen links his technique with Robert Delaunay's paintings. Under a reproduction of Delaunay's *Rhythm: Joie de Vivre* (1930) he writes:

the movements, the oppositions, and the resonances of large coloured circles of Robert Delaunay appear to come without doubt from the law of 'simultaneous contrast' of Michel-Eugène Chevreul (1786-1889) but, even more, they presage the future unity of sound and colour, such that I have the sense, such that I tried to find by the mutual influences which rebound onto rhythm onto the harmony and onto the harmony of timbres, and vice versa, in the orchestration of my *Turangalila-Symphonie*<sup>15</sup>

Messiaen is specifically talking about the way the shuffling and interlacing of *personnages rythmiques* allow the movements of harmonies and timbres to create

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colours, and she quotes Messiaen as saying that he knew Blanc-Gatti at this time; a Swiss painter who suffered from a form of nerve derailment 'which let him see, when he heard music, ineffable colours'. This is the only reference I have found to Messiaen researching his *son-couleur* relationship in a scientific way.

<sup>14</sup> Lyon, Raymond, 'Entretien avec Olivier Messiaen', Op. Cit., 132.

<sup>15</sup> Op. Cit., Interview with Claude Samuel accompanying Messiaen's *Turangalila-Symphonie*, 1962.

colour. But more than this, Messiaen is again placing himself in a French tradition of thinking about colour that begins with Chevreul.<sup>16</sup> In his most famous work *De la loi du contraste simultané des couleurs* (Paris, 1839) he clarifies the idea of ‘simultaneous contrast of colours’ mentioned by Messiaen:

If we look simultaneously upon two stripes of different tone of the same colour, or upon two stripes of the same tone of different colours placed side by side, if the stripes are not too wide, the eye perceives certain modifications which in the first place influence the intensity of colour and, in the second, the optical composition of the two juxtaposed colours respectively. Now as these modifications make the stripes appear different from what they really are, I give them the name of *simultaneous contrast of colours*, and I call *contrast of tone* the modification in intensity of colour and *contrast of colour* that which affects the optical composition of each juxtaposed colour.<sup>17</sup>

Chevreul’s ideas of superimposition and juxtaposition have obvious resonances with the surrealist ways in which Messiaen uses ideas and images in his music, but also with the Delaunays’ paintings, in which brilliant colour contrasts are employed in circles or panes (as in the stained-glass windows of the Sainte-Chapelle) as formal elements and cosmic symbols.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Goethe had done this before too.

<sup>17</sup> Marcussen, Marianne, ‘Michel-Eugène Chevreul’, *The Dictionary of Art*, Vol. 6, ed. Jane Turner (London: Macmillan, 1996), 564.

<sup>18</sup> DÜchting, Hajo, ‘Robert Delaunay’, *The Dictionary of Art*, Vol. 8, Ibid., 656. Delaunay’s reputation was established through his paintings of the ambulatory of the church of St. Severin (on the left bank of Paris). In *St Séverin No. 5: The Rainbow* (1909) for instance, the light of the stained-glass windows sets the arched shapes in a movement of alternation between light and darkness. In his next series of paintings of that great modernist symbol of the mechanical age, the Eiffel Tower, the cubist fragmentation and interpenetration of planes become increasingly abstract as the form of the structure is dissolved by the action of light until in *Simultaneous Windows on the City No. 4* (1910/11), the Eiffel Tower is only barely recognisable in the

These are employed in his first major Orphist piece *Simultaneous Windows on the City* (1912) in which Cézanne's notion of planes and sides of objects directed towards a central point (or several different points) is employed, and colour radiates inwards to warmer colours and outwards off the canvas. Describing this Delaunay states that:

They are windows open upon a new reality. This new reality is nothing less than the ABC of expressive methods that derive from the physical elements of colour creating new form. These elements, among others, are contrasts

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interplay of panes. Motive, in Cézanne's sense of centralised subjectivity, becomes secondary to the play of colours and shapes, a style construed as Orphism by Apollinaire. This marked the end of a 'destructive phase in which all spaces are broken up and divided, until infinitesimal dimensions in every direction are achieved. It is a dynamism dissolving yet remaining complete. It is the liquidation of familiar methods in art as respects line, colour, value, volume, chiaroscuro, etc ...' Hajo Düchting, *Robert and Sonia Delaunay: The Triumph of Colour* (Cologne, Taschen, 1994), 27 quoted from Arthur A. Cohen ed., *The New Art of Colour. The Writings of Robert and Sonia Delaunay* (New York: Viking Press, 1978), 13.

Delaunay's next work *The Towers of Laon* (1912) shows transparency of colour and faceted composition. The subject of the cathedral dissolves into the planes of the houses around as the painting moves towards the left-hand corner. This is where Cézanne's influence is clearest. His *View of Gardanne* (1885-6) shows houses rising up a steep slope abstracted into a configuration of interlocking planes. This technique derives from his notion that geometry is the basis of all form and that the distortion of form for the purpose of structural composition has a geometric basis. The idea of a series of planes using change of colour is based on the notion of advancing and receding colours i.e a dot of yellow on blue will give the effect of a depth structure in which the blue recedes and the yellow advances. Yet, blue on yellow will look as if it has been put on top i.e. the appearance of distance between the colours will be closer. Other factors such as texture, relative intensity, relative area and the effect of adjacent colours all have an effect. Colour and form for Cézanne, as for Delaunay and Messiaen, were therefore inseparable. Cézanne's desire not to 'reproduce nature [but to] recreate it' leads directly to the destruction, or at least the reconfiguring, of subjectivity in the works of Delaunay, Picasso and the cubists.

disposed in this or that manner, creating architecture, the orchestrated composition evolving like phrases of colour.<sup>19</sup>

He further states: 'The movement of colour is the fundamental dynamism of all modern art in painting'.<sup>20</sup> Delaunay's windows open onto another reality while Messiaen's stained-glass windows are meant to dazzle the mind and open up a new reality for humanity. But more than this, through Delaunay's paintings, Messiaen is able to connect his transformative idea of art with the dynamism of modernity.

One is immediately reminded of the interaction and dynamism of *personnages rythmiques* that open *Action de grâces (Poèmes pour Mi)* discussed in Chapter 2 where the shifting planes of chords create a form that, in the words of Delaunay, evolves 'like phrases of colour'. The surrealist superimposition of mode and *personnages* serendipitously engenders new colours and a new or '*autre réalité*'.<sup>21</sup> Looking a little further back in Messiaen's *œuvre* we can find the origins, or 'the ABC of (Messiaen's) expressive methods' in the piano *Préludes* (1928). Many years later Messiaen made the following observation of these pieces and himself at the time:

But I was already a 'sound-colour' musician. By means of the harmonic modes, transposable only a certain number of times, and taking [*tirant*] their own particular colours, I had come to oppose discs of colour, to interlace

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., Cohen, 16.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., Cohen, 57.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., Cohen, 16 (Delaunay), Op. Cit., Reverdy, 'Self Defense', *Critiques-Esthetiques*, (1919) in *Œuvres complètes: Nord Sud, Self Defense et autre écrits sur l'art et la poésie (1917-1926)*, 117.

rainbows, and to find a music of complementary colours. The titles of the *Préludes* hide studies of colours [*études de couleurs*].<sup>22</sup>

Messiaen's reference to 'opposing discs of colour' and 'complementary colours' implies the influence of Delaunay's paintings, while the 'interlacing rainbows' of colour, symbols of 'peace, wisdom and all luminous and sonorous vibrations', link these ideas by implication to the colours of the Apocalypse in Messiaen's religious aesthetics.<sup>23</sup> As such, colours for Messiaen are intricately linked to our human predestination to be with Christ after death and to be resurrected at Parousia.

Colour for Messiaen is not only implied in harmony but in the way (acciaccatura) dissonances or added notes seem to vibrate against and complement each other: i.e. this is the ideal of 'sounding bodies' working with and against resonance (see Chapter 2). If superimposition of added notes creates colour, superimposition of modes and rhythms will create more colour, hence my linking of dissonance with colour.

Messiaen's *Préludes* are like Messiaen's compositional workshop and provide a window onto a young composer experimenting with traditional means of musical construction, and drawing on a French theoretical heritage to clear new musical

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<sup>22</sup> Messiaen's sleeve note for Yvonne Loriod's disc of the *Préludes* and *Quatre Etudes de Rythme*, Erato STU 70433.

<sup>23</sup> Messiaen, Olivier, *Préface* to *Quatuor pour la fin du Temps*, ii.

paths.<sup>24</sup> The first *Prélude, La colombe* [The dove] effuses a classic antecedent-consequent structure or what Dupré calls binary form.<sup>25</sup>

**Ex. 99** *La colombe* (melody only)



<sup>24</sup> There was a French tradition of writing piano preludes including Debussy (I; 1910, II: 1911-13), Roger-Ducasse (1907), Fauré (1911-13), Vierne (1921) and then Tournemire's *Douze Préludes-Poèmes* (1932).

<sup>25</sup> In both Dupré's *Cours Complet d'Improvisation à l'Orgue* [Vol. 1, trans. Alain Hobbs (Paris: Leduc, 1962) originally published by Leduc in 1925], and D'Indy's *Cours de Composition Musicale* [rédigé avec la collaboration de Auguste Sérieyx d'après les notes prises aux Classes de Composition de la Schola Cantorum en 1897-98, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (Paris: Durand, 1912)] one can find the rhetoric of discrete (four bar) phrase lengths and their expansion. After the harmonisation of scales and small chorales, in the Dupré treatise, he goes on to describe the 'antecedent-consequent' structure (a repeated phrase with a half and then full close) and further states that: 'If the antecedent ends with a cadence other than the half-cadence, the consequent is by no means restricted to end with a perfect cadence.' (p. 16) From this the notion of the modulating consequent arises. He then describes the 'commentary' (which is a completely different phrase replacing the consequent) and a 'deductive commentary' (a commentary inspired by the rhythmic and melodic contours of the theme) which may include 'parenthetical sections' [*L'Incise*] - small mutations of aspects of the theme inserted in the commentary to ensure variety. Following this he defines binary and ternary form: the binary form makes use of a commentary (new or deductive), while a ternary form combines the commentary with the antecedent and consequent. (pp. 14-32) All of these notions are directly or indirectly espoused by Messiaen in *TMLM* (pp. 37-8). It is possible then to analyse *La colombe* following Dupré's ideal of binary form: theme (2+3 bars), 'deductive commentary' (4 bars), theme repeated (2+3),

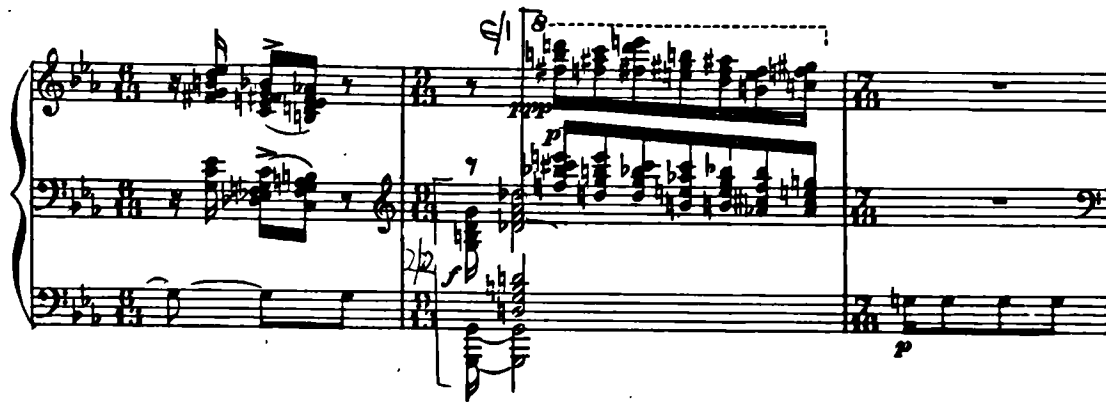
Perhaps with ‘20-20 hindsight’ one can sense the idea of birdsong, latent in the title of the work, in the ‘consequent’ phrases of each half of the piece (b. 6-10 and 16-20) but the use of D’Indyian *développement par élimination* or liquidation (in Schoenberg’s terms) is clearer.<sup>26</sup> More interesting though is the way Messiaen uses three layers or planes at the start with what Messiaen would eventually call ‘superior resonance’ in the r.h. (mode 2/2) colouring E major with its gentle dissonances.<sup>27</sup> This use of ‘superior resonance’ is more pronounced in *Cloches d’angoisse et larmes d’adieu* (*Prélude* 6) where mode 6/1 is superimposed on mode 2/2 in b. 5 (reminiscent of Ravel’s *le Gibet*) [ex. 53]:

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an altered version of the previous commentary (5 bars) and a coda of 3 bars. The relation between the commentaries is created by the repetition and transposition of motive forms.

<sup>26</sup> *TMLM*, Vol.I, 35. What is notable in Messiaen’s *vignette* is the way careful voice leading and registral control join the theme to the commentary and the repetition of the theme. Note also the way Messiaen increases the frequency of the accents (moving from accents to slurs with small decrescendo marks) in the commentaries to build towards the reintroduction of the theme. Registral heightening shapes the climax and conclusion; the bell-like superior resonances of the coda act as a final celebration of the through-composed melodic trajectory of the work.

<sup>27</sup> It is possible that this, Messiaen’s first published piece, was composed in honour of his mother and relates to one of her poems: *Tu tettes le lait pur ...: Sur la vitre d’azur une rose s’appuie,/En dégageant son front du feuillage élané;/Ma colombe privée y somnole, meurtrie/De parfum, oubliant le grain que j’ai versé* [my bold emphasis]. On the azure pane presses a rose/In freeing his brow from the slender foliage/My private dove sleeps there, dead/To the scent, forgetting the seed that I poured.

Ex. 100 *Cloches d'angoisse et larmes d'adieu* b. 4-6

Messiaen speaks of the 'effects of pure fantasy, similar by a very distant analogy to the phenomenon of natural resonance'.<sup>28</sup> These are embryonic examples of the opposing discs of colour, the interlacing rainbows of which Messiaen speaks in creating 'a music of complementary colours'.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>28</sup> *TMLM*, 51.

<sup>29</sup> Messiaen's sleeve note for Yvonne Loriod's disc of the *Préludes*, Op. Cit. See also the end of *L'Épouse (Poèmes pour Mi)* discussed in Chapter 4, where one can sense the way the B flat ninth chord (with added 6<sup>th</sup>) is coloured by triads and then chords in mode 3/2. Similar effects can be found in b. 14 for instance of *Chante d'extase dans un paysage triste (Prélude 2)*. The first section of this work uses an antecedent-consequent structure (4 + 4 bars) and a modulating deductive commentary (3 + 4 bars) ending with a 1-bar coda which anticipates the texturally varied repeat of the first eight bars. A sense of dramatic staticism is created by the sinewy circling of a<sup>1</sup> and a<sup>1</sup># in b. 1-8 (facilitated by the ambiguity of mode 2/1 and the lugubrious chords of the commentary).

The central section uses the same construction as the first section, with a canonic commentary that relies on the repetition of material up a third and is vaguely reminiscent of Chopin's 'cello' *Étude* Op.25/7 and the coda of Ravel's *Ondine* [*Gaspard de la Nuit*]. Again there is the notion of encirclement, around a c<sup>2</sup>#, this time echoed by the distant jingle of bells higher up on the keyboard that almost gives the impression of an improviser who, finding that he likes the idea that came spontaneously into his head, then finds it almost impossible to escape this idea. A 1-bar coda liquifies the motive of the commentary moving to a final section which presents a modified repeat of the opening section. In this final section, Messiaen reverses the order of the antecedent-consequent structures of the opening and adds a two-bar coda.



The notion of interlacing rainbows is clearest at the opening of *Les sons impalpables du rêve* ...<sup>30</sup> The first six bars use a recurring group or *tâla* of chords in mode 3/3 against chords in mode 2 in the l.h. that consistently return to a 6/4 A major chord (with an added sixth). Although the notion of ‘theme - deductive commentary – theme’ is present in the opening 6 bars, the modalism and repetition of material in the passage, together with the registral change in b. 6, breaks up any such formalist division. Unlike in *La colombe* where movement is superimposed on a chord, here both l.h. and r.h. planes begin to move and interlace their material:<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> This is a title reminiscent of Debussy’s *Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l’air du soir* (*Préludes* Book I /IV).

<sup>31</sup> Their symbioticism perhaps creates a tangible remnant of the Baudelairian *Correspondances* implied in the title. Messiaen was to use a very similar *idée* to that in the r.h. of this *Prélude* in the second refrain of *Alléluias sereins* (*L’Ascension*) b. 24-36 where a r.h. *tâla* accompanies the l.h. melody. Yet here there is a subtle difference: the barline is no longer controlling the length of the r.h. Near the end of *Les sons* (b. 63-4), the r.h. *tâla* figure merely fizzles out (Chapter 2 Part III discusses the way *personnages* end), in the manner to be used again in the *Alléluias sereins* (*L’Ascension*) b. 35-6. A *très lent* section, using a semiquaver triplet motive from the previous *Prélude*, ushers in the final glissando. These final events seem to indicate that Messiaen was unsure of how to end the piece after his *personnages* had finished.

**Ex. 101** *Les sons impalpables du rêve ...* (opening)

The musical score is for a piano piece in G major, 3/4 time. It consists of three systems of staves. The first system is marked 'Modéré' and 'Piano' (pp). The second system is marked 'Cédez' and 'a Tempo'. The third system is marked 'a Tempo' and 'ff'. The score features complex chordal textures and melodic lines in both hands, with various dynamic markings and articulations.

When Messiaen reworked the first 6 bars of *Les sons* as the first part of *Les Bergers (La Nativité)*, he took a further step:

Ex. 102 *Les Bergers* (opening)

Très lent  
R staccato

R: flûte 4  
nazard

P: flûte 8

*pp*

*mf* *louré*

There is still the same superimposition of modes, yet whereas in the *Prélude* the bar-line still controls the form of the music, here in *Les Bergers* the r.h. (and l.h.)

*personnages* operate independent of metrical control.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Although there are four phrases in the r.h. (the first three containing 19 chords (revealing Messiaen's interest in prime numbers), the way they are superimposed upon four melodic phrases renders any sense of Dupré's antecedent-consequent structure or even D'Indy's concepts of the *Phrase binaire* or *Phrase carrée* redundant: See also *TMLM*, Vol. I, 37. *Phrase binaire*: two melodic periods separated by a break [*repos*]. One has a modulating cadence, the other one is tonal (as in the Andante of Beethoven's 'Archduke' trio Op. 97). This corresponds most clearly to the Schoenbergian idea of a period. A *Phrase carrée* has four periods. D'Indy

These examples reveal how far Messiaen had come in seven years. His *personnages* in *Les Bergers* are differentiated by aspects of mode, timbre and articulation that make this passage sound extremely modern.<sup>33</sup> In their simultaneous interaction of movement, space and colour these *personnages* create an opposition or juxtaposition of images that is surreal in its intent to provoke emotion. Years earlier Robert Delaunay had made a similar transition, bringing a new meaning to colour by disabling the distinction in Cubism between form and content:

The new technique no longer uses chiaroscuro, perspective or traditional volume ... In the poetry of *pure colour* [Delaunay's italics], it is colour itself which by its play, its vital ruptures, its contrasts, forms the skeleton, the rhetorical development, without collaboration with the old methods like geometry. Colour is *form and subject*. It is the sole theme that is developed, and it is transformed beyond all psychological analysis. Colour is a function of itself, all its action is present at each moment, as in the musical composition of Bach's time or, in our own era, good jazz.<sup>34</sup>

Messiaen's *personnages* are thoroughly modern in their flexibility and rhetoric. In their play and vital ruptures they recall Breton's aphorism that 'Beauty shall be convulsive or not at all'.<sup>35</sup> The search for colour as a function in itself would transfer into Messiaen's music as a lifelong search for what Sonia Delaunay called the 'greater

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states that this can be a ternary phrase in which a period is repeated twice or indeed can consist of four different phrases. Op. Cit., D'Indy, *Cours de Composition Musicale*, 41-44.

<sup>33</sup> Not only is there a much greater differentiation between the lengths of *personnages* in ex. 102, but there are long chords in the l.h. of this example which create a sort of interruption or point of stasis (b. 3 and b. 4). In addition the r.h. *personnage* is quasi-palindromic both in its shape and in its chordal content. These elements combine to give ex. 102 a much greater sense of variety than ex. 101.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., Cohen, 17.

<sup>35</sup> Op. Cit., Breton, *Nadja*, 155.

colour exultation' or the surrealist's *point sublime* in which the soul is pushed 'jusqu'au spasme', beyond the boundaries of mortality to a perception of the eternal.<sup>36</sup>

Light is often used as a metaphor for the eternal in Messiaen as we can tell from his inscription '*dans la Paix ensoleillée du Divin Amour*' in *Combat de la mort et de la vie (Les Corps Glorieux)* to *Le Christ, lumière du Paradis* (XI of *Éclairs*). Light in Messiaen's aesthetics signifies a visible vestige of Christ's or God's glory. Music with its 'sounding bodies' is the prism for Messiaen through which light is radiated to a 'fallen humanity'; a *fil conducteur* made to draw mankind to God. One can sense a similar spirituality in the Delaunays' use of circles as symbols of the sun's energy, and the energy of colour as a cosmic entity, for instance in Robert's *Rhythm, Joie de Vivre* (1930) a copy of which Messiaen had on his wall [Fig. 4].<sup>37</sup>

In Delaunay's early theoretical essay *Light* (1912), included in the *Blaue Reiter* almanac, we can perceive his mystical feeling and devotion to this subject:

Light in nature creates colour-movement.  
 Movement is provided by relationships of *uneven measures*,  
 of colour contrasts among themselves that make up *Reality*.  
 This reality is endowed with *Depth* (we see as far as the stars) and thus becomes  
*rhythmic simultaneity*.  
 Simultaneity in light is the harmony, the *colour rhythms* which  
 give birth to *Man's sight*.  
 Human sight is endowed with the greatest Reality since it comes to us  
 directly from the contemplation of the Universe.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Op. Cit., DÜCHTING, *Robert and Sonia Delaunay: The Triumph of Colour*, 52 quoting Cohen, Op. Cit., 202. 'My husband and I first observed Chevreul's laws [of simultaneous contrast] in nature as we encountered them in Spain and Portugal, where the difference of light is the purest, and it is less overcast than [in France]. Moreover, the quality of this light allowed us to go even further than Chevreul in finding dissonances in coloured light, that is to say, rapid vibrations which provoked greater colour exultation by the juxtaposition of specific hot and cold colours.'

<sup>37</sup> When I interviewed Yvonne Loriód-Messiaen on 17 September 1999 this painting was on one of the walls in their house.

<sup>38</sup> Op. Cit., DÜCHTING, *Robert and Sonia Delaunay: The Triumph of Colour*, 81-2.

In both Delaunay's manifesto and in his painting there is a thirst and search for the infinite in colour.<sup>39</sup> When the Dutch theosophist M.H.J. Schoenmaeckers (a friend of the painter Piet Mondrian) 'characterised the joy of colour as the joy of human aspirations towards higher things, towards the light which embraces all colour' in his book *The New World Image* (1915) he expressed a desire to escape the world of modernity and the horrors of war; a desire that can equally be seen in Chagall's paintings such as *Bouquet with Flying Lovers* (c. 1934-1947) where the lovers are fleeing from modernity.<sup>40</sup> Likewise, colour is employed by Messiaen as a means to escape towards the light of God as a spiritual refuge from modernity. 'Colour-movement' is created in *Chant d'Amour II* (movement no. 4 in the *Turangalila-Symphonie*) by the *uneven measures* and the *rhythmic simultaneity* of the interlacing *personnages rythmiques* at fig. 14-15 (inclusive), where an incremental increase in the number of *personnages* build a 'depth structure' that culminates in the entry of the organ-pedal *thème de statue* at 5 bars after fig. 15.<sup>41</sup> The interlacing rainbows of *personnages* release a panoply of colour as a visible metaphor for the transformative power of the sexual union between man and woman as an intimation of the divine union that Catholics like Messiaen believe to be our predestination after our death.

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<sup>39</sup> Gage, John, 'Colour Theory and Colour Practice in Early Twentieth-Century Art', *Masters of Colour: Derain to Kandinsky* (London: Royal Academy of Art, 2002), 14.

<sup>40</sup> In relation to his *Cinq Rechants*, Messiaen states that the ideas of the fleeing lovers derive from the paintings of Chagall. *TRCO*, Vol. II, 152.

<sup>41</sup> The term 'colour-movement' derives from Messiaen's interview with Samuel, *Op. Cit.*, 1962.

But before this moment, colour has another function - it is the catalyst for the perception of Christ in ourselves and the discovery of truth:<sup>42</sup>

Furthermore, the sounds strike and knock our inner ear, and these multicoloured things move and irritate our inner eye, and establish context, rapport (as Rainer Maria Rilke said) with another reality: a rapport so powerful that it can transform our most hidden 'me', the deepest, most intimate, and dissolve us in the highest Truth which we could never hope to attain. Let us allow *a priori* that we are all capable of connecting sound to colour and colour to sound. Let us allow *a priori* that we are all capable of being amazed, of being dazzled by the sounds and these colours, and of touching, through them, something of that beyond, and this means of all sacred art - be it musical painting or coloured music - ought to be from the start a sort of rainbow of sounds and of colours.<sup>43</sup>

For Messiaen, God is greater than anything that can be thought about him, and colour acts as a mediating metaphor between the richness of *la vie intérieure* (the eternal within and the spiritual life of the self) and the *au-delà*, the eternal which is beyond the capacity of human thought itself. Colour helps make the invisible visible.

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<sup>42</sup> This is a central concern of Kandinsky also. In his *On the Spiritual in Art* (1911), Kandinsky states that: 'No more sufficient, in the psychic sphere, is the theory of association. Generally speaking, colour is a power which directly influences the soul. Colour is the keyboard, the eyes are the hammers, the soul is the piano with many strings. The artist is the hand which plays, touching one key or another, to cause vibrations in the soul. *It is evident therefore that colour harmony must rest only on a corresponding vibration in the human soul; and this is one of the guiding principles of the inner need.*' [Kandinsky's italics]. *On the Spiritual in Art*, trans. M.T.H.Sadler (New York: Dover, 1977), 25-26. In an interview with Larry Peterson on 9 November 1970, Messiaen states that Kandinsky was an important influence on his poetry and stated that he loved the interaction of red and green in his painting. Messiaen thought that they interacted by the red warming the green and the green cooling the red. *Messiaen's language of mystical love*, ed. Siglind Bruhn (New York: Garland, 1998), p. 224, footnote 10.

<sup>43</sup> Op. Cit., Rössler, 63.

## II Improvisation

Before returning to the notion of colour (in connection to birdsong) in the final part of this chapter, I want to discuss the role that improvisation played in Messiaen's composition. By first revealing the tradition from which Messiaen came, I will have a basis for discussing the idea of freedom and fantasy in his music in both musical and theological senses. I will then briefly discuss some of Messiaen's recorded improvisations.

In his novel *Doctor Faustus*, Thomas Mann describes the astonishment of an assembled audience at the piano improvisation of Adrian Leverkühn:

The limitations were debated, which this conception had to tolerate, by virtue of culture, tradition, imitation, convention, pattern. Finally the human and creative element was theologically recognized, as a far, reflected splendour of divinely existent powers; as an echo of the first almighty summons to being, and the productive inspiration as in any case coming from above.<sup>44</sup>

Mann sets out a convincing framework for the discussion of improvisation. The case for a human and creative theology of improvisation is fairly self-evident and will be dealt with below. It is evident that he sees it as a gift from the divine mediated by the more earthly categories of culture and tradition.

The whimsical idea of a grand French tradition of improvisation is a hegemonic and nationalist ideal that diminishes the heterogeneous approaches to the

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<sup>44</sup> Mann, Thomas, *Doctor Faustus*, trans. H.T. Lowe-Porter (Penguin Modern Classics, 1968; first published by Secker and Warburg, 1949), 112.



art that flourished in the 1920s and 1930s and that continue to the present day.<sup>45</sup> In practice, there were two contrasting approaches which Messiaen knew well: the intellectual rigour of Marcel Dupré and the visionary Catholicism of Charles Tournemire.<sup>46</sup>

Perhaps the contrast between Tournemire's *Précis d'exécution de registration et d'improvisation à l'orgue* (1936) and Dupré's *Cours Complet d'Improvisation à l'Orgue* (1937) is best illustrated by the following comments by Tournemire in which one can detect a waspish snipe at Dupré: 'During the course of an improvisation, it is almost impossible, in a sustained fashion, to attain the contrapuntal purity of the work ripened and realised over a long time', and 'We remember the teaching of our master César Franck in his organ class at the Paris Conservatoire: It was never a question of any formula, of any 'thing' [*truc*], but only of poetry, emotion and richness of imagination.'<sup>47</sup> Tournemire's attacks on Dupré's didacticism, and his academic emphasis on the technique of improvisation, reflect a certain pedagogical *sang-froid*

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<sup>45</sup> Well known improvisers of the 20s and 30s include Dupré and Tournemire, and in the next generation, Jean Langlais, Maurice Duruflé, André Fleury, Gaston Litaize and Messiaen. Following these organist/composers were others such as Jeanne Demessieux, Pierre Cochereau and Rolande Falcinelli, and the burgeoning contemporary generation of Thierry Escaich, Naji Hakim (Messiaen's successor at La Trinité), Loïc Mallié and Olivier Latry.

<sup>46</sup> I make this distinction not only on the basis of surviving recorded improvisations (and compositions) by these two organists but on the pedagogical direction of their respective treatises. Dupré's improvisations often used baroque forms, and he was renowned for improvising preludes (toccatas, fantasies) and fugues using a high level of counterpoint, while Tournemire was known for freer paraphrase-style improvisations such as those transcribed by Maurice Duruflé and the *pièces-terminales* in each volume of *L'Orgue Mystique*.

<sup>47</sup> Tournemire, Charles, *Précis d'Exécution de Registration et d'Improvisation à l'Orgue* (Paris: Eschig, 1936), 102.

that is not so evident from his playing.<sup>48</sup> Tournemire states that ‘it appears to be absolutely impossible to fix the rules of improvisation, it is thus that improvisation truly deserves its name’, but he also states that improvisation should ‘give the illusion of something written’ even though he acknowledges that inspiration cannot be always entirely consistent.<sup>49</sup>

What this amounts to is a belief that, as with any art, one should learn all one can about the art and then forget it to let inspiration take the reins.<sup>50</sup> Tournemire is concerned with an art that reflects human fallibility, through its transitory status, but that elevates the listener through a direct exposure to another soul.<sup>51</sup> Improvisation has a spiritual dimension:

The art of improvisation is like an illumination which brightens suddenly the soul of the artist, the door towards the heights, and the procedures disappear completely when the thought is noble, the emotion real.

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<sup>48</sup> One only has to hear the surviving recordings of Tournemire and Dupré improvising (not to mention Duruflé’s Tournemire transcriptions) to realise that Dupré’s improvisations can be rather dry and formulaic in their reliance upon a form of hyper-chromaticism in counterpoint to engender an austere language, while Tournemire is much more in touch with the sonority of the organ, the building and a larger sense of fantasy. Throughout his text Tournemire situates himself in the tradition of Franck in order to give himself authority. Tournemire was in Franck’s organ class for a brief time from 1887-1890 and became organist of Ste-Clotilde in 1898.

<sup>49</sup> Op. Cit., Tournemire, 102.

<sup>50</sup> ‘It is necessary to know all in music to have the pretension to improvise well.’ Op. Cit., Tournemire, 102.

<sup>51</sup> Tournemire states that long preparatory studies are required; ‘that is to say the profound understanding of harmony, of counterpoint above all. It is important that every artist attracted by this fugitive and sometimes marvellous genre, understands that he may only honestly be able to improvise if, first of all, he has the prudence *to arm himself* [Tournemire’s italics] in the manner of which we will speak.’ Op. Cit., Tournemire, 102. He emphasises that the serious artist must avoid clichés and espouse a knowledge of all music, technique, the organ, architecture, form and the ability to manipulate material.

It is thus that the improviser feels himself sustained as though by a mysterious force in which he finds beautiful periods, beautiful accents, without the narrow and infantile preoccupations that ‘comb’ [*peigner*] an indigent counterpoint in two parts, a cold *trio* [Tournemire's italics] of keyboards ... or some other combination ... All *preparation* is therefore opposed to this special art. This does not signify, however, that any fault is therefore to be let go, *without will*, to the display of disorder! Quite the opposite.<sup>52</sup>

Evidently Tournemire is on a fervent religious and spiritual mission.

Serendipity for him is a conduit to the eternal whereby the player participates actively in creating a ‘sort of miracle’.<sup>53</sup> Tournemire’s ‘discoveries’ only began to be written down (in *L’Orgue Mystique*) after he had been organist at Ste-Clotilde for some 25 years. Messiaen went to hear Tournemire play on many Sundays before he was appointed to La Trinité, but it took until 1983 for him to describe Tournemire as ‘a composer of genius, and a marvellous improviser’.<sup>54</sup> Perhaps in this we can sense a desire on Messiaen’s part to suppress the public’s awareness of Tournemire’s real musical influence on him. In the same letter, Messiaen goes on to align himself with Tournemire:

When Tournemire improvised in concert, it was good. But the improvisations were much more beautiful during Masses at Sainte Clotilde, when he had the Blessed Sacrament in front of him. I think I resemble him somewhat in this respect. I improvise much better during a Service, on my organ at the Trinité. In a concert, my gifts desert me, and my imagination disappears. Don’t forget

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<sup>52</sup> Op. Cit., Tournemire, 102.

<sup>53</sup> Op. Cit., Tournemire, 102-111.

<sup>54</sup> Personal interview with the composer’s widow, Yvonne Loriod-Messiaen on 17 September 1999.

that I am 75 years old and that it is not possible for me to lay myself open to ridicule, playing useless pastiches in one of London's largest concert halls.<sup>55</sup>

Like Tournemire, Messiaen took direct inspiration for improvisation from the Catholic liturgy and the building. In La Trinité, as in Ste-Clotilde, the organist faces directly down the nave from the loft; in both cases this is a truly majestic sight.<sup>56</sup>

If I have dwelt on Tournemire here it is because Dupré's influence on Messiaen is well documented, not least by Dupré himself.<sup>57</sup> Messiaen has said that Dupré helped him to discover himself 'by making me work methodically at improvisation.'<sup>58</sup> One of Messiaen's most interesting early works is the *Diplyque* (*Essai sur la vie terrestre et l'éternité bienheureuse*) because it so clearly bears the marks of Messiaen's formal training in Dupré's improvisation class.<sup>59</sup> The first half of the piece (*la vie terrestre*) reflects Dupré in its formal rigour, its emphasis on counterpoint and the chromaticism of the musical language (reminiscent of Dupré's *Symphonie-Passion* [1924] and in particular the *Scherzo* Op.16 [1919]).<sup>60</sup> Only flecks

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<sup>55</sup> Simeone, Nigel ed. and trans., 'Letter from Messiaen to Aprahamian 15/12/83', «*Bien Cher Félix*» *Letters from Olivier Messiaen and Yvonne Loriod to Felix Aprahamian* (Cambridge: Mirage Press, 1998), 51.

<sup>56</sup> Messiaen has stated: 'I was a good performer, nothing more, but I was a very good improviser.' Op. Cit., LWT, 18.

<sup>57</sup> Dupré, Marcel, 'Du temps où la gloire', in 'Olivier Messiaen a 50 ans', *Le Guide du concert et du disque*, Paris, année 39, no. 229 (April 3, 1959), 1090. 'I have the interior pride to have been the first to have given Messiaen confidence in himself as a composer, several months before he knew Paul Dukas, to whom he was not slow in giving all his affection.'

<sup>58</sup> Op. Cit., Paul Griffiths, 30.

<sup>59</sup> N.B. The word 'Essay' in the title suggests that the work has a pedagogical directive.

<sup>60</sup> Messiaen attended the French première of the *Symphonie-Passion* in June 1928 (it was originally an improvisation created in the Wanamaker store in Philadelphia in December 1921. It was given its first performance as a written piece on 9 October 1924 in a concert at Westminster Cathedral, London). Messiaen later wrote: 'I have often read, played, and replayed

of mode 2 allude to the more stereotypical Messiaen. What is remarkable about this work is the way the first section (*la vie terrestre*) is metrically exactly transformed in the second section (*l'éternité bienheureuse*) becoming a long languid melody of the utmost serenity and langour that looks over its shoulder to the *Communion* pieces in Tournemire's *L'Orgue Mystique*, Messiaen's *Le Banquet Celeste* and forward to the *proche avenir* of the *Extrêmement lent, tendre, serein* section of *Combat de la Mort et de la Vie*. Here is the form of *Diptyque*:

***la vie terrestre:***

| section | bar     | structure (in bars)   | key   |
|---------|---------|-----------------------|---|
| a       | 1-16    | (4+4)+(4+4)           | c (modal consequent)                                      |
| b       | 17-30   | (3+3)+(2+4)+(3)       | c – E (c#) - g - (dominant preparation)                   |
| a1      | 31-47   | (4+4)+(4+4)           | g   |
| b1      | 47-61   | (3+3 ½)+(1 ½+4)+3     | g - b flat - f - (dominant preparation)                   |
| a2      | 61-76   | (4+4)+(4+4)           | f - e flat  |
| b2      | 77-101  | (3 ½+3 ½)+(7 ½+7 ½)+3 | e flat - f# (c#) - modal - g (c) - (dominant preparation) |
| a3      | 102-117 | (4+4)+(4+4)+3         | c (dominant preparation)                                  |

***l'éternité bienheureuse:***

|    |        |             |               |
|----|--------|-------------|---------------|
| a4 | 121-6  | (3+3)       | C             |
| b3 | 127-35 | (2 ½+3 ½+3) | C – modal - C |
| a4 | 136-41 | (3+3)       | C             |
| b4 | 142-51 | 2 ½+3 ½+4)  | C – modal - C |

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it since. It is such [*encore*] a prophetic work. The Peons and Epitrites (rhythms of 5 and 7) of the first movement, the oriental and modal poetry of the second, the overwhelming *Crucifixion* (where one finds the germ of the future *Chemin de la Croix*), the flashes of stained-glass windows, the prayer [*la mantée*] in glory, the cosmic halo of the Resurrection: all the organ literature derives from this beginning, this first indispensable monument!' Olivier Messiaen, 'Hommage à Marcel Dupré', *Courrier Musical de France*, no. 35 (1971), 113. In Dupré's *Scherzo*, see p. 6 system 3 and 4 which have a similar texture to several passages in the first section of *Diptyque*.

The form of *la vie terrestre* is simple, revealing an overall movement to the higher dominant (g), the lower dominant of (f), a stabilising move to the tonic followed by a dominant preparation leading to a final section in C.<sup>61</sup> The academic contrapuntal style of the first section (use of canon, diminution, augmentation) is unusual for Messiaen and owes much to Dupré's love of form and counterpoint.<sup>62</sup> Each a section of the first part contains a registrally and texturally articulated 8+8 bar antecedent-consequent structure, and uses a half-cadence and a full cadence in the appropriate spots, just as Dupré states in his treatise. A distinct break is then made before the **b** section, which clearly functions as a 'deductive commentary' and is in the *phrase ternaire* form of D'Indy (like the first four bars of the piece except expanded over 14 bars).<sup>63</sup>

If one imagines that the piece was improvised, the skill of the player is tested in sections **a1** where he is asked to play the theme in augmentation in the l.h. and create an accompaniment in the r.h., and in section **a3**, to play the theme in canon. One can almost see Dupré peering over Messiaen's shoulder and gently nodding his approval.

By a comparison with the opening sections of the work, one can easily see the melodic transformation technique involved between the first and second sections of the piece:

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<sup>61</sup> This sort of tonal trajectory is used in *La mort du nombre* and *Prière du Christ (L'Ascension)*.

<sup>62</sup> Messiaen studied improvisation in Dupré's *classe d'orgue* at the old rue de Rome Paris Conservatoire.

<sup>63</sup> *Phrase ternaire*: three melodic periods, separated by two repose: two modulatory cadences and one tonal (i.e. Schoenbergian sentence). Op. Cit., D'Indy, 41-4. See also *TMLM*, 37.

**Ex. 102** *Diptyque: la vie terrestre* (opening) and *l'éternité bienheureuse* (opening)

The musical score is divided into two sections. The first section, *la vie terrestre*, is marked 'Modéré (♩ = 120)' and features a dense, rhythmic texture for the 'CLAVIERS' (keyboards) and 'PÉDALE' (pedals). The second section, *l'éternité bienheureuse*, is marked 'Très lent (♩ = 40)' and features a sparse, serene texture with 'G. Fl. harm.' (G. Fl. harm.), 'R. V. cé.' (R. V. cé.), and 'Tirasse R. seule' (Tirasse R. seule).

By contrast to the first section, where rich foundation stops dramatise the turmoil of the world-weary soul, the gentle undulation of the organ's string stops and serene flute solo in the second section expose the lightness of liberation as the melody embarks on a heavenward voyage, casting off the earthly sloth of the pedals to end in *l'éternité bienheureuse* on the highest note of the organ keyboard (c<sup>4</sup>).

As I have implied here, this sort of (written) improvisation has a theological topos. Improvisation for a musician like Messiaen was a form of self-discovery in which he gradually learnt to use his modes, to find himself as a composer and to access the *au-delà* through his chosen instrument, the organ.<sup>64</sup> It is impossible to underestimate the role of the organ in Messiaen's output. He has stated that:

<sup>64</sup> Messiaen says of his modes that he 'progressively appropriated them by improvising at the organ.' Interview in Jan. 1992 with Jean-Christophe Marti in *l'Avant Scène Opera*, Op. Cit., 12.

The stained-glass windows magnify the light, one of God's first creations, but the organ brings to the church something similar to light that yet surpasses it: the music of the invisible. It is the wondrous overture to the beyond ...<sup>65</sup>

It is safe to say that for Tournemire and Messiaen improvisation had a strong theological component. As both Dupré and Tournemire imply, and contrary to what is popular or mythic perception, improvisation is not a spontaneous art. Like the practice and perfection of repertoire, it too can be practised by a process of self-criticism and repetition. Latent in this is a metaphor for bringing oneself (and humanity) slowly through hardship to a oneness with Christ.<sup>66</sup>

As Tournemire implies, at the base of learning improvisation is an expansion of the player's resources. The more resources a player possesses the more freedom of choice and options he will have for creativity at any given moment in an improvisation. Indeed, it is because he has a collection of resources and options that the player can surprise himself; something will happen in the moment that is 'a sort of miracle'.<sup>67</sup>

It is this serendipity that Tournemire speaks of as a 'sort of illumination', that is most interesting from a theological perspective because what it implies is that the player is able to let go of himself (and his preconceptions) to a point where he may be

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<sup>65</sup> Messiaen quoted by Olivier Latry in the liner notes for Latry's complete recording of the organ works DG 471 480-2, 60.

<sup>66</sup> In a note about *Apparition de l'Église éternelle* Messiaen writes: 'scissors, hammer, some suffering, and some tests, tailoring and polishing the elected persons, living stones of the spiritual edifice (that which the unceasing throbbing in the bass expresses). The vision is very simple, almost brutal at its peak. Established in slowness, it takes a long time to disappear ...' Liner notes for Louis Thiry's 1995 recording of *Apparition de l'Église éternelle, Livre d'Orgue* and *Verset pour la Fête de la Dédicace*, Jade CD: 74321 30296-2, 4.

<sup>67</sup> Op. Cit., Tournemire, 102.



truly used as an instrument of a higher power.<sup>68</sup> It can be argued that this level of freedom is an intimation of the freedom that will be attained after death and that, in such a state, the soul is moved (perhaps by the Holy Spirit) to effect a transformation, not only of the player himself but of the listening audience. In the same way, when a musician plays from memory, the lack of sheet music releases all a musician's powers to reflect on the music (and himself), and this can create an appreciable connection and spontaneity that engenders a higher level of communication between player and audience.<sup>69</sup>

During an improvisation a player may become full of *la joie d'esprit*. If this can be taken as an overbrimming of joy within the soul, or as Messiaen might put it, 'a dazzling with excess of truth', then the improviser's actions may reflect actively on the glory of the divine.<sup>70</sup> Improvisation can then become both an act of praise and an act of communication that may bring us closer to an active participation in the awareness of Christ within ourselves. As such it becomes a means of self-awareness and can stimulate a cathartic recognisance both of the presence (or lack thereof) of Christ, but also of the nature of our human filiation to him. Improvisation being an art that is not permanent but chimeric, it can only provide a momentary intimation of the glory promised by our predestination to be like, and to be with, Christ. As such, the conclusion of an improvisation can leave a moment of euphoria that we recognise to

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<sup>68</sup> Op. Cit., Tournemire, 102.

<sup>69</sup> In thinking about Improvisation I have found the thought of Jeremy Begbie stimulating. See 'Theology and the Arts', *The Modern Theologians: an introduction to Christian Theology in the Twentieth Century*, ed. David F. Ford, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 693-96. For further reading see his *Theology, Music and Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

<sup>70</sup> Messiaen quoted in Rössler Op. Cit., 10. 'And, as St. Thomas Aquinas says: music brings us to God through 'default of truth', until the day when He Himself will dazzle us with 'an excess of truth'. That is perhaps the significant meaning - and also the directional meaning - of music ...'

be only temporary: a vestige of divine glory, that cannot last because of our human state. This is one of the fundamental aspects and powerful recognitions made by Messiaen's music - that we can only asymptotically aspire to the 'divine plan' and, though we cannot literally transcend our own mortality (except by dying), it is music's function to allow an intimation of the *au-delà*.<sup>71</sup>

When Charles Tournemire improvised in Ste-Clotilde he played with the full view of Ste-Clotilde's monumental 19<sup>th</sup> century Gothic nave and with a photograph of Christ's face on the shroud of Turin on the wall next to him.<sup>72</sup> Tournemire was a man described by his second wife as '*profondément croyant*'.<sup>73</sup> Improvisation for Tournemire as for Messiaen was the habitual manner of expressing their faith. Ernest Hello, one of Tournemire and Messiaen's favourite writers, wrote that: 'Art is an ascension. Its law is to ascend. Pushed by its nature towards the eternal nature [*type*] of things, it tends towards the ideal [*il tend du côté de l'ideal*]', and 'Art is the memory, of the presence of the universal presence of God.'<sup>74</sup> One can hear this sort of apocalyptic telos in Tournemire and Messiaen's music as much as in Tournemire's improvisations, for instance on the plainchant Easter sequence *Victimae Paschali*,

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<sup>71</sup> Reverdy, Pierre, 'Poésie', *Œuvres complètes: Nord Sud, Self Defense et autre écrits sur l'art et la poésie (1917-1926)*, Op. Cit., 206. 'Le poète est essentiellement l'homme qui aspire au domaine réel, le plan divin, la création mystérieuse et évidente.'

<sup>72</sup> Both La Trinité (Messiaen's church) and Ste-Clotilde (Tournemire's church) share the same architect: Théodore Ballu (1817-1885). In May 1894 an Italian called Secondo Pia took the first successful photo of the shroud of Turin. Initially he saw nothing, but as George Didi Huberman relates, there in the darkroom, a face looked at Pia from the bottom of the tray; a face totally unexpected. He nearly fainted. See Katherine Bergeron, *Decadent Enchantments*, Op. Cit., 80. This presumably was what Tournemire saw on his wall when he improvised.

<sup>73</sup> Stewart, Madeau, 'Interview with Mme Alice Tournemire', on 22 October 1970 for the BBC, first broadcast on 4 November 1970.

where his inspiration burns white hot. For Tournemire 'all music that does not have as its goal the glory of God and the rejoicing of the soul is nothing but a chattering and a diabolical verbosity [*rabâchage*].'<sup>75</sup> One can imagine Messiaen at this conference on sacred music in 1937, silently agreeing with Tournemire. It only remained for Messiaen to follow and create an *œuvre* that is concentrated around the liturgy of the ecclesiastical year and that is consecrated to the glory of Christ.<sup>76</sup>

So what were the tangible fruits of Messiaen's study of improvisation? It is well known that Messiaen wrote his *Messe de la Pentecôte* and *Livre D'Orgue* because he felt that improvising every Sunday depleted his energies of inspiration for composition. Yet he did improvise at La Trinité after these were written, and many of these are recorded and in the possession of Mme Loriod-Messiaen.<sup>77</sup> This shows how

<sup>74</sup> Hello, Ernest, *L'Homme: La Vie, La Science, l'Art* (Paris: Perrin, 1894), p. 367 and 369 respectively.

<sup>75</sup> Tournemire, Charles, 'L'Orgue à travers les siècles', *Congrès International de Musique Sacrée* held at Ste-Clotilde on 22 July 1937, Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques 1937 (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1937), 50. This was the same festival in which the Delaunays' exhibited their works.

<sup>76</sup> I am very particularly interested in a young and magnificent Christian artist - pure Christian, of a *sound* 'mysticity': Olivier Messiaen(.) ... Olivier Messiaen is only twenty-three years old, his future is *splendid* - and what is even better, much better, he prays and conceives his musical works to the glory of Christ.' Charles Tournemire, Letter of 23 July 1931 from the Île de Ouessant off the coast of Brittany, reprinted in Schlee and Kämper eds., *Olivier Messiaen: La Cité Céleste - Das himmlische Jerusalem*, Op. Cit., 141.

<sup>77</sup> Messiaen states '... my post of liturgical organist obliges me to improvise. My wife records them, and I relisten to these improvisations with a very critical ear.' Messiaen goes on to describe the genesis of a piece at the feast for *Jeudi Saint* (Holy Thursday) where the church celebrates the institution of the eucharist by Christ: 'I had three minutes to fill and play - there it was that I had a moment of inspiration. I played a piece that had the air of nothing at all the first time: a very simple bacchius rhythm, a banal sixth chord ... but I was suddenly conscious, on rehearsing myself, that this music was not like any other.'

essential improvisation was to composition for Messiaen, as it has been for composers such as Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Franck, Dupré and Tournemire before him, to name just a few. The influence of both Tournemire (and to a lesser extent Dupré) is writ large in Messiaen's entire *œuvre*. Both discuss oriental modes in their treatises. Tournemire cites 72 Hindu modes useful to improvisation, while Dupré discusses Indian, Arabian, gypsy and Oriental modes but gives scant account of their application to his or others' music.<sup>78</sup> It is not possible to overemphasise these influences on Messiaen's thought and the role of improvisation through the classes of Dupré, the Sundays with Tournemire, simply experimenting at the piano and the weekly ritual of confiding his thoughts to the organ at La Trinité.

In *TRCO* Messiaen describes the genesis of his *Messe de la Pentecôte*:

Work written in 1950. But improvised at the organ a long time before.

Here is its history:

Having become organist of the Great Organ at the church of La Trinité (Paris), in 1930 (I was then 22 years old), my service obliged me to undertake short improvisations on plainchant texts, especially versets on the Antiphons of Vespers. In the course of these offices, I always played written pieces (Nicholas de Grigny, J.S. Bach, modern music, etc.). In 1945, the creation of a midday mass and the permission to allow exclusively modern music to be heard, offered me the possibility of long organ recitals, in which I played either the works of my contemporaries, or my own works, or I improvised, to better form one body with the grand divisions of the Holy Sacrifice: Offertory - Consecration - Communion, and to better put in relief the mysteries of the liturgical year, the grace proper to each mystery, the colour, the poetry, and the

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I believe that I had been inspired by the moment, touched by this very beautiful office. I rewrote this piece, I called it *The Institution of the Eucharist*, and I began to write the *Livre du Saint Sacrement ...*' Op. Cit., 'Interview with Messiaen', *l'Avant Scène Opera*, 17.

<sup>78</sup> Op. Cit., Tournemire, 116 and Op.Cit., Dupré, Vol. II, trans. John Fenstermaker, 31-7.

particular sentiment of each time and each festival. These improvisations became little by little ‘one’ improvisation, always forgotten, always refound, always repeated: the terrifying growlings of the beast of the apocalypse alternated with the song of thrushes and blackbirds, the sounds of water and the wind in the leaves with the religious meditation and the Holy Spirit’s tempests of joy [n.b. the surrealist conjunction of language here as well as the inference to the catalytic power of the Holy Spirit], the Hindu rhythms mixing with the neumes of plainchant, the choir of skylarks with Tibetan trumpets, the melodies of resonance and timbre of the chromaticism of durations, the most searched for polytonalities, the most strange and shimmering timbres connected to [*voisinaient*] the clearest permutations and rhythmic *interversions*. One finds there the known and the unknown, the visible and the invisible, the world of men and the world of angels. It is thus that my *Messe de la Pentecôte* was born. Without being my best work, it is without doubt the *one that most conforms to my true nature* [my italics], and is also the only one truly written for the organ at La Trinité (of which it utilises all the timbres and combinations of timbres), since it had been improvised several times - during the course of the years 1948 and 1949 - on the organ of La Trinité. I committed it to paper in 1950. Since then I have renounced all improvisation.<sup>79</sup>

Of course for an improviser like Messiaen to renounce improvisation is tantamount to the impossibility of renouncing inspiration. In the *Messe* and the *Livre d’Orgue*, Messiaen attempts to consecrate some of the most radical and modern sounds ever to have been written for the instrument to the glory of God.<sup>80</sup> As if this

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<sup>79</sup> TRCO, Vol. IV, 83.

<sup>80</sup> In doing so he may have felt that he had reached a certain limit of expression with the instrument. One only has to think of the extraordinary registrations used in the *Entrée*, the *Offertoire* with its (sounding) C<sup>1</sup> *basson* 16 snorts [Tournemire uses a similar idea, but with a different timbre, in his *Supplications et fugue modal* (L’*Orgue Mystique* no. 34 [IX<sup>e</sup> *Dimanche après la Pentecôte*]) and the marimba-like combination of flute 4, piccolo 1 and tierce 1<sup>3/5</sup>, the birdsong in the *Communion* and the conjunction of the extreme 1ft and 32 ft registers at the end

were not surreal enough in its juxtaposition, Messiaen turned to improvisation on a little-known recording of *l'Âme en Bourgeon* [The Burgeoning Soul] to decorate the poetry of his mother Cécile Sauvage recited by Gisèle Casadesus. In a note to the disc Messiaen states his wish to:

surround them [i.e. the poems], to accompany them, and to prolong them by an improvised musical commentary ... I wanted to be discrete, the most discrete possible, that one should hear me without hearing me and, in the end to leave the poems in their light and darkness, adding only here and there my humble colours. A man may not say these things in a high voice: that is the property of woman and Cécile Sauvage who had the knowledge to say it. My only excuse was to have been the awaited infant ... But the musician of 1978 remembers himself always to have been the infant of 1908, and it is his most pure pride to have inspired *l'Âme en Bourgeon*.<sup>81</sup>

These poems form part of the last chapter of Sauvage's book *Tandis que la terre tourne* (pub. 1909) and are essentially an interior monologue between mother and child, using beautiful images from the natural world to describe what she carries. With this disc Messiaen pays homage to his mother who believed that the child she was carrying would be a musician. Speaking of the child in her womb, she reveals a premonition of the colours and birds which feature in his music:

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of this movement, also the strange landscapes of the two *Pièces en trio*, *Soixante Quatre durées* and the surreal *Les Mains de l'Abîme (Livre d'Orgue)*.

<sup>81</sup> Liner notes to *l'Âme en Bourgeon*, recorded in La Trinité, French Erato, Stereo LP STU 71104. for other recorded improvisations see *Olivier Messiaen: Quartet for the End of Time/Improvisations*, GB productions ID5085GCDVD, 1992. This DVD contains three improvisations that revisit the ideas of the shepherds and the wise men used in *La Nativité*.

Ce carré de clarté là-bas, c'est la fenêtre  
 Où le soleil assied son globe de rayons.  
 Voici tout l'Orient qui chante dans mon être  
 Avec ses oiseaux bleus, avec ses papillons;<sup>82</sup>

To have a set of poems written about himself - to read them and see elements of his own history in them was indeed self-revelatory for Messiaen, and it was from this that he came to believe in predestination.<sup>83</sup> There is seemingly no order to the poems on the disc, or any sense of progression from the embryonic stage to the infant birth. One can sense in these verses, perhaps with hindsight, the mediation of darkness into light, the contrast between the internal world and the external as a metaphor for the relation between mortality and the afterlife, as well as an image of the dim religious light and incense laden atmosphere that (as in Huysmans's novels) creates the rich spiritual atmosphere inside a large Gothic building. The richness of iconographic imagery from the natural world imbues the poems with the sense of the great richness of *la vie intérieure* - the poet's spiritual life and her unborn child. At the same time, there is trepidation and even dread of the birth that will one day break the intimate bonds between mother and son. In another poem, not used in this set, Sauvage writes that: 'He is born, I have lost my young loved one' [*Il est né, j'ai perdu mon jeune bien-aimé*], revealing her feeling of the extraordinary wrenching of the child from her at birth.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., Liner notes to *l'Âme en Bourgeon*, This is v. 13 of *L'Abeille* (The Bee): This plot of brightness there, is the window/Where the sun seats his globe of sunbeams./There all the Orient sings in my being/With its blue birds, with its butterflies;

<sup>83</sup> 'Cécile Sauvage (1883-1927)[his mother] said "I suffer from an unknown music." It is from that that I found my belief in predestination.' Interview with Messiaen in *Diapason*, no. 234 (December 1978), 38.

<sup>84</sup> Op. Cit., LWT, 8.

In the opening poem of the disc she feels herself as one with the primordial mire of nature: 'Nature, let me mix in your mire ...' [*Nature, laisse moi mêler à ta fange*] and she feels the 'fruit of of her body which grows from her sap'. Before this, the disc begins with chords of contracted resonance and clarinet interjections *en crescendo* that bear a remarkable resemblance to the opening of *L'apparition du Christ ressuscité à Marie Magdalene* (no.11 of *Livre du Saint Sacrement*) [1984] where these chords describe the darkness, literal and spiritual, and confusion of night before the morning of the third day after Christ's death.<sup>85</sup> It seems that this motive was forming in Messiaen's mind for seven years before the composition of this written piece which encourages a parallel with both the primordial embryonic mire in *Nature, laisse moi*, and another line in the poem 'I carry in my breast a world in movement' [*Je porte dans ma sein un monde en mouvement*].<sup>86</sup>

To illustrate the following line in the second poem, 'Am I able to call you from the darkness towards the light ...' [*Ai-je pu t'appeler de l'ombre ...*] Messiaen uses a flute solo stop's transcendent timbre with the pungent *voix humaine* stop to evoke the desire for her son's soul to escape its maternal confine. This finishes just as the narrator reaches the last verse in which Sauvage worries about bringing the child into the world. Will he ask: '-What have you done, my mother?' [*Qu'avez-vous fait, ma mère?*] and will I ask '-What have I done, my child?' [*Qu'ai-je fait, mon enfant?*]

Messiaen also deploys the effect that would be used at the beginning (b. 3) of *Puer natus est nobis* (no. 4 of *Livre du Saint Sacrement*); after the eighth poem on the disc *Je savais que ce serait toi* in which Sauvage imagines what it would be like to be inside herself with her child. Another aspect used are quiet chords in mode 3, and

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<sup>85</sup> The clarinet is a plangent organ stop on the positif organ at La Trinité.



birdsong like that used in the *Fauvette des jardins* sections of *Méditations sur le Mystère de la Sainte Trinité* (nos. 2 and 9). Yet the most recurrent idea throughout the disc is the angular melody that first appears in the *Trois Petites Liturgies* and the *Offertoire (Les choses visibles et invisibles)* from the *Messe de la Pentecôte* [1950].<sup>87</sup> It is used near the end of *Enfant pale embryon* ... (no. 3), almost all through *L'Abeille* (no.11) and at the end of *Viens, je veux t'expliquer* (no. 12) where it dies off into nothingness:<sup>88</sup>

**Ex. 104** *Offertoire (Les choses visibles et invisibles)* b. 11-12



The main reason Messiaen chose the subtitle of the *Offertoire* was that ‘ “the invisible is the domain of the Holy Spirit: the spirit of truth, that the world received not, because the world knew him not” (St John). The hidden life of grace supposes the *séjour* of the Holy Spirit in the faithful soul ...’<sup>89</sup> Can we take Messiaen’s being in the womb as the hidden life of grace within the faithful soul of his mother? The link

<sup>86</sup> This line is reminiscent of the idea of the movement and flux in Baudelaire’s *Correspondances*.

<sup>87</sup> Messiaen says he derives this motive from Ravel’s *Le Tombeau de Couperin* (see *TRCO*, Vol. IV, 93).

<sup>88</sup> In its most remarkable appearance, it appears on the 16 foot positif *basson* at the end of *La tête* (no. 4) echoing the desolation of the final line: ‘And your head of death, it is I who has sculpted it’ [*Et ta tête de mort, c’est moi qui l’ai sculptée*] This motive appears to capture the poem’s mixture of hope for the young child’s life and the desolation and prospect of losing the child. Indeed the overriding sentiment is one of sadness and desolation at the prospective ‘loss’ of the child from its maternal haven.

<sup>89</sup> *TRCO*, Vol. IV, 89.

between improvisation and the Holy Spirit becomes clear - improvisation is a means of making truth manifest to an unbelieving world that requires the purification of the spirit before it can undergo the spiritual journey of redemption.

In the fragmented tapestry of Messiaen's commentary one senses this longing and nostalgia for a connection long severed. Improvisation provides a possibility of reconciliation, a communion of souls born on the wind of the Holy Spirit and fashioned out of his experience as a musician - itself a homage to his mother. Creation and the winds of change that drive it opened new paths for Messiaen with the *Messe de la Pentecôte*, paths that would extend the aesthetics of freedom in improvisation and the use of colour as a metaphor for the invisible.

### III Of Colour and Birdsong

Birdsong is used in almost every one of Messiaen's compositions from 1941 onwards. Its use leads increasingly to his most colourful, free and expressive music and because of this I want to examine it in relation to the theology of improvisation and the theories of colour espoused by Robert and Sonia Delaunay above.

As I have already implied, light and colour are, in Messiaen's aesthetics, metaphors for the appreciable glory of God. They make the invisible visible. As Hello writes: 'By the light, creation makes itself the word for our eyes: it recounts to them the glory of the creator.'<sup>90</sup> As any schoolchild knows, when you pass light through a prism, the colours of the spectrum appear. This is a good way of thinking about the transformative power of Messiaen's music. Even if we can't hear the colours that

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<sup>90</sup> Op. Cit., Hello, *L'Homme: La Vie, La Science, l'Art*, 282.

Messiaen saw in his head, we can appreciate in Messiaen's music the ways in which he uses timbre and dissonance as a tangible allegory of colour in music. From 1949, Messiaen's use of birdsong makes a quantum leap in the level of dissonance in his scores but, as we shall see, dissonance is always tempered by the need to express colour.

With hindsight one can see the gradual emergence of birdsong in Messiaen's output. In *Ta Voix* [*Poèmes pour Mi*] a single line played on 2 flutes and a piccolo sing of the *Oiseau de printemps qui s'éveille* over a 6-4 chord of F#. In this the voice [*voix*] of the beloved becomes inseparable from the voice of Christ opening like a window full of the afternoon [*Fenêtre pleine d'après-midi*] onto the souls of the lovers. Birdsong is not only the agent of filiation between the lovers and Christ [*Tu es la servante du Fils*] but actually symbolises the voice of Christ made audible (or visible as it were) to the senses of humanity through nature. The idea of using birdsong in such a deliberately pictorial and literal way is both radically naïve and surreal. Birdsong invokes modernism in its colour/dissonance in order to transfigure it and can therefore be posited as nature's panacea to soothe the festering wound of modernity.

Messiaen had probably not begun to notate real birdsong by 1937, but it may be, as I have implied, that he had a predisposition to birdsong from knowledge of his mother's poetry, let alone the poetry of Éluard and Reverdy or the birds that appear in Chagall's paintings.<sup>91</sup> What is most notable about the *style oiseaux* in *Ta voix* is its

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<sup>91</sup> Messiaen quotes his mother's poetry: 'I have seen the lark rise, her voice creating a limpid landscape in the light air. Soar up young lark, your eggs are laid in the corn and the drops of dew quiver on the golden grass'. My mother's poetry made me aware of many details around me that I otherwise probably would not have seen. I have subsequently notated the songs of

improvisatory quality and the way all the notes still belong to mode 2/1. Nevertheless Messiaen's birds can easily sing outside his mode as he demonstrates in the *Thème d'allégresse* from *Dieu parmi nous* [la Nativité]:

**Ex. 105** *Dieu parmi nous* (*Thème d'allégresse*) b. 8

**Vif et joyeux**

R: Fonds et anches 8,4  
G: Montres 8,4, plein-jeu  
Péd: 16, 8, tirasse R

Messiaen himself makes the link between birdsong and improvisation when he describes the process of notating his feathered friends:

Birds are true musicians. In the beginning they clearly did what we are doing - they listened ... and they heard the sound of water drops and they heard the sound of the wind and they tried to imitate them. And that is how they began to sing.

Birds sing very high, very fast and with no definite pitch. What I write can be played by musical instruments, which means that it is pitched, it is not so high and it is not quite so fast.

I have taken live notations of a great many garden warblers [*fauvettes des jardins*]. I have notated a hundred garden warblers in as many days ... and that's during several years. I chose the best of these warbler songs and from that I make a single ideal warbler, the most beautiful one imaginable, which is a composite of all the warblers that I have heard.

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*thousands of larks* [*d'alouettes*] ... it has been one of my great specialities. Op. Cit., LWT, 23. The first book of birdsong notations deposited in the Bibliothèque National de France (Ms. 23077) is marked Saint-Germain-en Laye-Paris 18-31 May, 1952.

I don't reflect, I write; I haven't time, the birds go by very fast ...  
I listen to the bird that is nearest to me and that I can hear the most clearly and that's the one whose song I notate ... two notations are made: I take one myself in the form of a musical dictation ... and my wife comes with me and makes a tape recording. When I get home, I make a second notation from the recording. The notation taken from the tape recording is usually more accurate, but less artistic ... because out in the open I have heard many variations which the tape recorder hasn't picked up.

You must understand that birds have discovered everything. For sixty years I have been trying to imitate the freedom of their collective improvisation.<sup>92</sup>

What strikes me about this passage, apart from the last line, is its relevance to something Messiaen says earlier on in the programme:

In my religion, we believe in the reality of the invisible and we believe in the resurrection of the flesh, the resurrection of the dead. And the bodies glorified, the resurrected dead, have qualities that are often attributed to characters in fairy stories; but here, it is no fairytale, but reality. The bodies glorified are first and foremost impassive: they are no longer susceptible to suffering, illness and death. They are also ethereal which means that they no longer need to eat and there is no longer reproduction or birth. They are definitely glorified. They are glorified and thus luminous which means that they can be their own light, making themselves visible or invisible. And most beautiful of all their qualities, is that they are *agile*, which means that after my death I expect to be able to travel to all the stars with no difficulty and with no equipment and straightaway at lightning speed. That is what is meant by the gift of agility. I have written a piece of music about it, but it's a very insignificant piece and doesn't express the true beauty of the subject.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Op. Cit., LWT, 25-7. I have used part of this quote before, but I use it here to a different end.

<sup>93</sup> Op. Cit., LWT, 10-11.

Messiaen is speaking of *Force et Agilité des Corps Glorieux* [*Les Corps Glorieux* (V)], but the following piece *Joie et Clarté des Corps Glorieux* uses the style *oiseaux* with enormous improvisatory freedom to symbolise this agility and *allégresse*, reminiscent of plainchant alleluias, that stream over the top of a D flat major chord (with an added 6<sup>th</sup>):

Ex. 106 *Joie et Clarté des Corps Glorieux* p. 11 (first three systems)

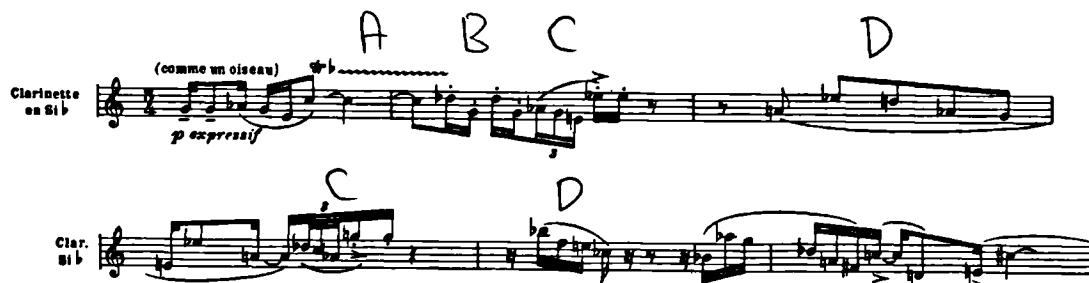
The musical score consists of three systems of piano music. Each system has three staves: a grand staff (treble and bass clef) and a separate bass staff. The key signature is D-flat major (three flats). The first system begins with the instruction 'Pos.' and 'demi-stacc.'. The melody in the right hand is highly ornate and flows continuously, while the left hand provides a harmonic foundation with sustained chords and moving lines. The second and third systems continue this pattern, with the right hand featuring various ornaments and fingerings indicated above the notes.

The aesthetic link between the agility of the glorified bodies, improvisation and birdsong is then clear in this music. The improvisatory quality of birdsong intimates the glorified bodies i.e. the state we will be in after death when we are resurrected in Christ. This state is also intimated in the generation of harmonic colour through the

ways in which Messiaen's melody plays with the underlying harmony. Colour then becomes a catalyst in making Messiaen's vision appreciable and therefore of making the presence of Christ glorified visible to humanity.

Colour, improvisation and birdsong are all brought to the fore in the *Liturgie de cristal* (*Quatuor pour la fin du Temps*). In this piece, for the first time, Messiaen makes the connection between *personnages rythmiques* and birdsong, and this enables him to set up an even greater level of dissonance/colour. Although written for violin, (B flat) clarinet, violoncello and piano, it is the clarinet and piano that take the foreground of musical interest. A *tâla* or string of 29 chords in the piano (rhythmically altered on each appearance) provides a kind of ground for the improvisation of the blackbird [*merle noir*]:<sup>94</sup>

**Ex. 107** *Liturgie de cristal* (opening, clarinet part only)



There are certain recurring *idées* that, even in Messiaen's idealised version, distinguish or individuate the blackbird's song: the trills (A), the repeated tritone D flat - G (B), the motivic shape of the demisemiquaver triplet followed by two semiquavers (C), or the descending four-note shape in b. 3 that is used in diminution

<sup>94</sup> In Messiaen's *Préface* (p. I) he writes: 'A blackbird [*un merle noir*] and a nightingale soloist improvise, surrounded by the sonorous dust of a halo of trills lost very high in the trees. Transposing this to the religious plain: you have the harmonious silence of heaven.'

in b. 5 (D), to name just the most obvious characteristics. These features allow Messiaen's phrases to function like *personnages rythmiques* even as the improvisatory quality and level of change between these discrete musical segments pulls away from any such generic conception.

Such a modernist musical discourse is complemented by the idea of moving planes and colours in Delaunay's paintings. The interaction of these *personnages* and the piano, together with the other instruments, is a small-scale model for what happens in the *Turangalila-Symphonie* where an inner dynamism is created by the symbiotic and serendipitous movement of planes 'evolving like phrases of colour'.<sup>95</sup>

Messiaen's desire to 'oppose discs of colour, to interlace rainbows, and to find a music of complementary colours (. )',<sup>96</sup> is particularly apt as the *Quatuor* resulted from a vision of the angel of the apocalypse with a rainbow around its head.<sup>97</sup> In this work he crystallises his desire to go to an *autré réalité* through music, to escape hunger and privation in the German POW camp Stalag VIIIA. Although Messiaen never joined the long line of French composers who wrote Requiem masses (Saint-Saëns, Fauré, Desenclos, Ingelbrecht, Alain and Duruflé), the *Quatuor* is effectively Messiaen's Requiem. He believed that he was going to die but was untroubled by this because of his faith and his dreams of a colorific after life - the invisible once again made visible through his coloured music.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Op. Cit., Cohen, 16.

<sup>96</sup> Messiaen's sleeve note for Yvonne Loriod's disc of the *Préludes* and *Quatre Études de Rythme*, Erato STU 70433.

<sup>97</sup> See Messiaen's *Préface* to the *Quatuor*, I.

<sup>98</sup> Op. Cit., LWT, 39. 'I did not know what would happen to me. I had to do forced labour and I was abused by the German soldiers ... but I didn't mind; even if I died I knew that I would go to heaven.'



With this movement from the *Quatuor* Messiaen begins a trajectory towards what Delaunay calls the ‘poetry of *pure colour*’:

The new technique no longer uses chiaroscuro, perspective or traditional volume ... (.) In the poetry of *pure colour* [Delaunay’s italics], it is colour itself which by its play, its vital ruptures, its contrasts, forms the skeleton, the rhetorical development, without collaboration with the old methods like geometry.<sup>99</sup>

After the ‘Tristan’ trilogy and his brief flirtation in the *Mode de valeurs et d’intensités* with what would become integral serialism in the hands of his students Boulez and Stockhausen, comes a small period of experimentation when Messiaen explores the use of birdsong without any reference to mode. The central bird section of *Communion (Les oiseaux et les sources)* [*Messe de la Pentecôte*] reveals the greatest sense of *fantaisie* and freedom whilst the two *Pièces en trio* [*Livre d’Orgue*] retreat from this only in their closer adherence to the *personnages* principle. These experiments must have made Messiaen think about the relationship between form and content in his music and how it might be necessary to reorganise his music to achieve a level of continuity that was unsustainable in the *Communion*.

He does this in *Réveil des Oiseaux* (1953 rev. 1988), which Messiaen tells us contains ‘nothing but birdsong’.<sup>100</sup> Continuity is achieved by employing a multitude of different birdsongs, giving him a greater degree of textural options, and by reinvigorating the refrain-couplet notion of form, used earlier in the *Alleluias sereins*

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<sup>99</sup> Op. Cit., Cohen, 17.

<sup>100</sup> *Note de l’Auteur*: Messiaen goes on to emphasise the proximity to nature of his work and how the instrumentalists must strive, with the aid of onomatopoeic instructions, ‘to find the desired timbres and attacks’.

[*L'Ascension*], but with a different musical language. This sort of formal thinking dominates most of Messiaen's birdsong works for the rest of his life.

Birdsong in this work represents the ultimate liberation of colour in Messiaen's music to date because of the way his non-tonal, asymmetrical lines (with *idées* or motives that are peculiar to each bird) move simultaneously with little or no reference to each other. The break with any sort of traditional notion of phrase construction (D'Indy and Dupré) and the metrical supremacy of the barline is completed through improvisational *fantaisie*. Colour becomes both 'form and subject' and in Messiaen's heterophonic textures, 'all its action is present at each moment'.<sup>101</sup> The fact that Messiaen superimposes birds from different countries, that would never fly together, only underlines the cosmic significance of Messiaen's interlacing planes.

Messiaen's birds unselfconsciously promote the transcendent voice of God in nature. Even as they do this, they celebrate as much as attempt to overcome their own humanly-created status through their motivic plasticity and the instrumental virtuosity required to play them. In speaking of the divine they make an asymptotic attempt to come to the divine. However, ultimately made and recreated by humanity, their symbolism must fall back to earth even as they point humanity towards the divine.<sup>102</sup> As such they insufflate and juxtapose the experimental spirit of the avant-garde with religious meaning. The degree to which one is able to transcend the other is surely one of the modernist paradoxes of this music.

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., Cohen, 17.

<sup>102</sup> It is interesting that Messiaen did not experiment with *musique concrète* and birdsong. Perhaps he realised that he could more effectively make *musique concrète* pieces with traditional instruments. Also the technological limitations at the time may have put him off the idea.

*Réveil des Oiseaux* and *Oiseaux Exotiques* (1955-6) are, with hindsight, themselves transitional works. Through the tentative reintegration of mode in the latter work, we can perceive Messiaen grappling with the problem of colour and form. Although not solely derivative of Boulez, these works bear the mark of Boulez' timbral and textural organisation in his works of the late 1940s and *Le Marteau sans Maître* (1953-5). Yet, while in this latter work there is a sense of small musical cells or *idées* constantly forming and being destroyed, in *Réveil des Oiseaux*, Messiaen's *idées* have a greater degree of stability in their recontextualisation. Nevertheless, these quasi-*personnages* evince a greater degree of differentiation than those in the *Turangalîla-Symphonie* that results from the more erratic contours of the *style oiseau* and the absence of modal control.

The freedom that arises from the absence of such hierarchical structures has a tangible link to the theology of improvisation outlined above yet, as with the modes, one can sense a quasi-tonal background inherent in some of the melodies. For instance, the blackbird [*merle noir*] melody at fig. 18-19 in *Réveil des Oiseaux* has a very strong A major quality about it, while the piano Robin [*rouge-gorge*] has a sense of C centredness. The Celesta's Robin has an F centredness and the solo violin's pitches are dominated by a C major triad embellished with grace-note resonances.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> This quasi-tonal quality to Messiaen's bird melodies is more noticable when a single bird is singing, as in the second piece from *Méditations sur le Mystère de la Sainte Trinité*, and even more when such music is heard in a resonant acoustic. In such a case one can hear the way dissonances registrally play with the overtones of more stable or prevalent pitches.

Ex. 108 *Réveil des Oiseaux* 4 after fig. 17

Yet, as all the instruments occupy a relatively narrow tessitura, the saturation of musical space works to undermine the sense of these stable centres even as the interaction of timbres serves to heighten it. From fig. 17-27 more and more instruments enter with their birdsong further clouding the space, the combination of timbral colours mixing and breaking down any sense of stability to the point where the level of timbral, spatial and harmonic dissonance is best thought of as an infusion of colour.

This style of music finds its apogee in the *Épôde* from *Chronochromie* where birds take off and fly, stop to admire the scenery, and then move on again.<sup>104</sup> The profusion of detail only allows the listener an inkling of cognition, catching a bird momentarily flying higher or louder than another. More than in any piece to date in Messiaen's output, the mind is confused by the amount of detail. What makes this piece of music really radical is that we are not meant to make sense of it. Even at a little over four and a half minutes duration the ear quickly gives up attempting to make sense of this music based on traditional musical syntax, even when the eye can see the conductor beating Messiaen's fictitious 4/8 time-signature.<sup>105</sup> Even though one can point to certain lines and could talk about higher-level non-static developmental procedures within lines, the confusion wrought by the heterophony may lead to an appreciation of the work as 'static'.<sup>106</sup> The idea of the piece is that this radical approach to musical time forces the mind to abandon clock-bound time and in its confusion, dazzled by the proliferation of birds, to leave mortal fallibility for eternity.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> The *Épôde* stops abruptly, some birds caught in mid-flight in a manner similar to that in which *personnages rythmiques* in *Le Sacre* are uprooted at the end of sections.

<sup>105</sup> I say fictitious because the time-signature is really just for the convenience of the conductor to maintain the ensemble, and bears no relevance to rhythms in the music. A similar idea exists with editions of early music in which bar lines are added for modern convenience. In this sense, Messiaen's music again revives a topos of medievalism.

<sup>106</sup> *TRCO*, Vol. I, 7. Messiaen (following Aquinas) writes: 'To speak of the immutable and indivisible is to name eternity, and to name eternity is to affirm the existence of God.' Messiaen admitted that he could only clearly hear this passage himself by going very slowly.

<sup>107</sup> In an interview with Raymond Lyon Messiaen states: 'And it is this dazzling which brings us closer to a leap beyond time, to a leaving of oneself that will be eternity.' Op. Cit., Lyon, 'Entretien avec Olivier Messiaen', 132.

Messiaen's vision of the voice of God in nature is played out through a multitude of birds from all over the world singing together - an allegory of human unity under the divine. The compositional and improvisatory freedom implied in Messiaen's heterophonies (liberated from the hierarchical shackles of the modes) is an allegory of the promise of mortal liberation (implied in predestination), while the extreme dissonance provides an array of colours which, like the effect of stained-glass windows, literally dazzles the mind 'by an excess of truth'.<sup>108</sup> Colour therefore intersects with a larger aesthetic and musical search for truth and the sublime in art, a topos I discuss in Chapter 6.

Like panes of glass put together in a rose-window, the movement of colour creates the form in *Couleurs de la Cité Céleste* (1963). Messiaen states that 'the work never ends - having never really begun: it turns [in] upon itself, interlacing its temporal blocks, like the rose window of a cathedral with its flamboyant and invisible colours ...'.<sup>109</sup> The overall form of *Couleurs* represents a Lisztian compaction of the movements of *Chronochromie* into a single-movement form:<sup>110</sup>

|                             |  |
|-----------------------------|--|
| <b><i>Chronochromie</i></b> | <b><i>Couleurs de la Cité Céleste</i></b>                                    |
| <i>Introduction</i>         | fig. 1-12  |
| <i>Strophe</i>              | fig. 13-32   |
| <i>Antistrophe</i>          | fig. 34-60   |
| <i>Strophe</i>              | fig. 67-79 (or fig. 80 if the <i>troglydite barré</i> section were included) |
| <i>Épôde</i>                | fig. 81-5 (followed by a piano interlude at fig.86)                          |
| <i>Coda</i>                 | fig. 87-98   |

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<sup>108</sup> Op. Cit., Rössler, 10.

<sup>109</sup> Messiaen, *Première Note de l'Auteur*: 'The form of this work depends entirely on colours, melodic and rhythmic themes; complexes of sounds and timbres evolve like colours.'

<sup>110</sup> I make an analogy here with the way in which Liszt's single-movement B minor piano sonata uses the cyclic development of themes. The analogy is clear with Messiaen, when one considers the way the *Alleluia du huitième dimanche après la Pentecôte* is recontextualised throughout.

Messiaen clearly labels material throughout, even the colours of chords, so keen is he to communicate the meaning of his composition. The proliferation and kaleidoscopic shuffling of material through time makes the *personnages* principle into a broader structural idea. It is the interaction of these elements or segments as they are now that is designed to create the dazzling [*éblouissement*] of colours that Messiaen seeks as a visible representation of the New Jerusalem and Christ.<sup>111</sup>

The idea is that these panels are like panes of glass in a larger window, all reflecting different colours to dazzle the mind. Yet the reality of Messiaen's form is one of competing and completing narratives which both potently suggest fragmentation as much as they suggest an attempt at a higher-level diremption (or at least syncretism) in which the parts are made subservient to a polysemic whole.<sup>112</sup> For instance the whole of the structure is divided in half by the plainchant *Alleluia du Saint-Sacrement* (lines 1 and 2 at fig. 32 and line 3 at the end fig. 98) while the *Sept anges pour les sept trompettes* idea occurs at fig. 8, 67 and 78 complementing the material labelled *L'Abîme* (The Abyss) which occurs most regularly of all the material

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<sup>111</sup> Christ, as the logos, is at the centre of Messiaen's stained-glass window. Messiaen, *Première Note de l'Auteur*. 'The sound-colours [*sons-couleurs*] are in their turn symbolic of the Celestial City and the person [*"Celui"*] that inhabits this place. Beyond all time, beyond all place, in a light without light, in a night without night ... the Apocalypse, more terrifying again in its humility than in its visions of glory, is indicated only by a dazzling of colours ...' The word *indicated* here implies that colour is the only appreciable image of the glory of God available to humanity.

<sup>112</sup> In fact, Messiaen himself makes a similar comparison in the *Première Note de l'Auteur* when he states that 'one may compare the transformations of these *personnages* acting in several superimposed scenes unfolding [*déroutant*] several simultaneous different histories.' Compare this to his description of *personnages rythmiques* as actorial in *TRCO*, Vol. II, 112-3 quoted in Chapter 2, Part III.

i.e. at fig. 8, 30, 40, 42-6, 57, 62-3, 67, 78, 87 and 96.<sup>113</sup> Even if ideas like the *Septanges* and *The Abyss* seem like iconic representations (like panes of glass in a larger window) the mere fact that they reappear changed compromises the ‘static’ image of the piece that Messiaen would like to give and implies the higher-level development model proposed in Chapter 2.

There are several remarkable features of *Couleurs* that are germane to my discussion of colour. The first is Messiaen’s use of chords in this work and the question of why Messiaen’s chords sound like Messiaen. The answer to this goes back to the discussion about modes in Chapter 2 where it was made clear that the principles of resonance and acciaccaturas (as dissonances) together with the preferencing of triads in Messiaen’s harmonies gave his music its sense of colour and luminosity. If one looks at any of the classifiable chords in Messiaen’s music: modal harmonisations (i.e. mode 2/1), chords of transposed inversions (or chords on the dominant), chords of contracted resonance, turning chords, the chord of resonance, the chord of fourths: the common feature of all these elements (perhaps with the exception of the chord in fourths) is the way, to a lesser or greater extent, in which triadicism is present.

Even in the extreme complexity of the chords used in *Couleurs* or for that matter the chords in the chorale that concludes *Chronochromie* (p.225-6) or the chorales at the end of the two *Septenaires* of *La Transfiguration*, the same principles hold good. The degree to which triadicism is suffused is indeed greater in these works when compared with the simplicity of chords in *Le Banquet Céleste*, but triads are still present, and it is the way these triads are allowed to resonate with added notes (that may themselves belong to other triads) which gives Messiaen’s chords their inner life

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<sup>113</sup> The three trombones and bass trombone at fig. 7 use the same descending idea that features in



that defies analysis. One could try to isolate triads and show how non-harmonic tones colour them through their dissonance, but this would only lead us back to the conclusion that the dynamic infusion and diffusion of colours and dissonance is layered in a delicate balance - one cannot differentiate between the 'chicken and the egg'. The base colours merge with their additives making the theoretical possibility of differentiating between consonance and dissonance almost redundant. Indeed, the rapid vibrations of resonances of these chords may produce what Sonia Delaunay calls the 'greater colour exaltation ...' - the diffusion and confusion that drives the mind to accept a new 'reality'. Chords in *Chronochromie* and *Couleurs* enact 'dynamic movements reaching into the depths of the picture', as in *Simultaneous Windows on the City* (1912) or in *Circular Forms, Sun No. 2* (1912/13), even as, through their resonances they set up new vibrations and movements that reach out to the unknown.<sup>114</sup>

Messiaen's colourful chords are used to underpin rhythms in *Strophe I* and *II* of *Chronochromie*. Here is the beginning of *Strophe I*:



2) By three metallic timbres: a) gongs - b) bells - c) suspended cymbal, Chinese cymbal and tam-tam.

3) by a stock [*race*] of chords of diverse colours, applied systematically to each permutation. To the top permutation, 'turning chords', to the middle 'chords on the dominant', to the bottom permutation 'chords of contracted resonance'. All this is played by 22 solo strings.<sup>115</sup>

The strings, playing a rhythm of melody and timbres (using quasi-serial *permutations symétriques*), provide a more stable and colourful template for the improvisation of birdsong in the glockenspiel and woodwind.<sup>116</sup> Once the *permutations symétriques* are completed, so too is the piece. The use of *permutations symétriques* has a close

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<sup>115</sup> TRCO, Vol. III, 80.

<sup>116</sup> Messiaen begins with a chromatic scale of durations from a demisemiquaver to a semibreve, including all the durations in between, which gives a total of 12 different durations and therefore 479 001 600 *interversions*. From this Messiaen derives *permutations symétriques* by a quasi-serial ordering process which limits the number of useful combinations considerably. Messiaen makes a distinction between the number of demisemiquavers in each duration and the order he reads them in. For instance if the first *intervention* (like a prime form of a row) consisted of a demisemiquaver, (1), a semiquaver (2) and a dotted semiquaver (3), Messiaen might rearrange their order as a semiquaver (2), demisemiquaver (1), and dotted semiquaver (3) and then renumber or reread this sequence of durations as semiquaver (1), demisemiquaver (2), dotted semiquaver (3). This new order is then the first in a series of *permutations symétriques*. Messiaen then continues until he gets back to the same 'scale of chromatic durations used at the start. This gives a reasonable figure of permutations (not far from the number of objects chosen). The permutations are also sufficiently different enough to be juxtaposed and superimposed.' TRCO, Vol. III, 79. On p. 7 of TRCO, Vol. III, Messiaen explains how the idea of natural delimitation links *permutations symétriques* to 'the charm of impossibilities' present in symmetrical modes and non-retrogradable rhythms (see Chapter 2). From p. 3-76 of vol. III, Messiaen gives a thorough tabular description of *permutations symétriques* with examples from *Couleurs* (p. 26-31) and *Les Élus Marqués du Sceau* (*Éclairs dur l'Au-Delà*).

analogy to Delaunay's emphasis on the irregular rhythms that create a 'composition evolving like phrases of colour'.<sup>117</sup>

In the central sections of *Couleurs* (fig. 42-6 and 62-6), Messiaen uses Hindu and Greek rhythms, along with birdsong (again in a fictitious 4/8 time-signature) to counterpoint his *interversions*.<sup>118</sup> The effect is more aphoristic and spartan than that used in the strophes of *Chronochromie* and as a result less intrinsically colourful. Yet the sense of improvisation (and of interlacing rainbows or planes) in these passages is much more tangible, and this marks this passage out as an advance in Messiaen's thinking about colour and time.

In such passages, one is left wondering about the method of construction. Did Messiaen lay down the *interversions* first and then find the appropriate Hindu and Greek rhythms with a sprinkling of birdsong to counterpoint them? It is more difficult to tell here than in the strophes whether Messiaen used a form of collage technique.

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<sup>117</sup> The allusion to *Klangfarbenmelodie* is tangible, except here Messiaen's primary concern is with rhythm. The question must be asked as to whether Messiaen derived the idea of filling out the durations of his *permutations symétriques* with birdsong from Edgard Varèse's *Ionisation* (1929-31). For instance, at the very opening of this work, the Gong and the high and low tam-tams play long durations that look like a primitive form of interversions, while other instruments such as the side drum, 2 bass drums, and the snare drum play rhythms underneath that fill out and play with parts of these longer durations. This becomes even more obvious at 3 before fig. 6 and especially at fig. 9 to 6 after fig. 12. Messiaen was certainly aware of Varèse's music. Iannis Xenakis has stated that: 'My attention was drawn to Varèse in the early 1950s, when he was almost unknown. One person to do this was Messiaen who, when leaving the Conservatoire after a class, mentioned that there was a French composer living in the United States who was one of the most interesting of the century.' Bálint András Varga, *Conversations with Iannis Xenakis* (London: Faber, 1996), 56-7.

<sup>118</sup> In doing this Messiaen uses what he calls the '*loi des rapports attaque-durée* (law of the rapport between attack and duration): of equal duration, a brief sound followed by a silence appears longer than a prolonged sound'. *TRCO*, Vol. I, 23. See Chapter 3, Part I. At fig. 42 of *Couleurs*,

The machinations of collage are however, strikingly obvious at fig. 69 of *Couleurs* where the plainchant *Alleluia da la Dédicace* (as a *mélodie principale*) and the *Alleluia du huitième dimanche après la Pentecôte* are suffused with harmonic and timbral resonances, creating a diffuse A major and a miasmatic stained-glass window effect reflected onto the listener.<sup>119</sup> As in Delaunay's paintings, 'Colour is composed of colour-masses made up of an infinity of tones, the harmony of which makes the unity ...'<sup>120</sup> The surrealist and intrinsically modernist juxtaposition of images points towards a higher-order unity in colour exaltation which has an eschatological telos in Messiaen's music.

Yet this exaltation carries with it a necessarily unfulfilled promise of emancipation and, via religious spin, redemption. The aura of human creation left as a trace of intentionality in the work's plasticity seems, as in *Couleurs*, to undermine such goals. It is again one of the modernist paradoxes of Messiaen's music that it attempts to express the noumenal and infinite while wearing the means of its phenomenal and worldly production on its sleeve. Like the changes in representation that occur in the early twentieth-century modernist art of Cézanne, Matisse, Picasso and Delaunay, what is needed in Messiaen's music is for the listener to make a leap of faith from 'seeing as' to 'believing as'. Messiaen asks us, through the productive power of the imagination, to become willing participants in his musical world and by

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Messiaen uses this 'law' with *intersion* 13. Trumpet 3 plays only a semiquaver in value but the rest of the *intersion*'s duration is made up by rests.

<sup>119</sup> On p. 50 of *Couleurs de la Cité Céleste*, Messiaen writes [of this passage], 'The ensemble must give the impression of the proliferation of colours [*des couleurs foisonnantes*] of a stained-glass window.' In the preface to *TMLM*, p. 8, Messiaen counts 'all that evokes stained-glass windows and rainbows' amongst his principal sources of inspiration. Messiaen returned to this specific subject in *Un Vitrail et des Oiseaux* (1986).

<sup>120</sup> Op. Cit., Cohen, 76.

implication our own transfiguration.<sup>121</sup> This is why the notion of the transcendental is at once so attractive and yet so difficult to achieve.

*Chronochromie* and *Couleurs* represent the apogee of his achievement in the improvisational use of birdsong, rhythm, dissonance and colour. The monumental *La Transfiguration de Notre-Seigneur Jésus-Christ* (1965-69) is more summative than exploratory. Yet even by this stage birdsong is so prominent and meretricious that the style of Messiaen's works devolves into a sort of self-parody. Messiaen seems to reach a point, perhaps in *Transfiguration*, where he has discovered the *raison d'être* of his inner need and, ignoring the teleological and progressive-minded composers and aesthetic mandarins on the 'scene', forges ahead to expand his repertoire of birds. Yet he does not really alter how he uses them. This is why the *Sept Haïkai* (1962) sounds like what he was writing in *Réveil des Oiseaux*, despite the tired invocation of oriental exoticism, *La Fauvette des Jardins* (1970) sounds like a large offcut from *Catalogue d'Oiseaux* (1956-8) and *Un Vitrail et des Oiseaux* (1986), despite the use of the new *Hors Tempo* device (in which birds enter freely on a sign from the conductor), chorales and the evocation of stained-glass windows, returns to the world of *Couleurs*. But there is a reason for this. Messiaen's music begins to repeat itself because, having discovered his compositional *raison d'être*, he evidently feels that birdsong, through its association with light (colour and dissonance), is the best way to

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<sup>121</sup> Such a problem is fundamental to French art. For example, the irreal juxtaposition of colour in Fauvist or Surrealist art exposes its own plasticity by the nature of the motive depicted, while recognising itself as a metaphor for the joy of the interior life or 'otherness'. This characteristic of self-recognition and its capacity to see itself as both internally and externally reflexive becomes a justification of Surrealism, Expressionism, and the play-thing of Structuralism and post-Structuralism.

express his religious mission of reviving ‘the faith in the luminous and positive elements of the Christian religion’.<sup>122</sup>

Yet, it is ironic that at the moment Messiaen’s music is at its most expressive and colourful, it also becomes more and more naïve and formulaic. For instance in the second piece of *Méditations sur la Mystère de la Sainte Trinité* (1969) for organ, Messiaen uses the plainchant *Alleluia de la Dédicace* (the same melody used in *Couleurs*, as if to remind us that he is composing religious music after all), in unison that in its simplicity is meant to be an iconic representation of God’s holiness.<sup>123</sup> ‘Profound’ pedal tritones and toccata figurations, used for example in *Je suis Celui qui suis* (no. 9), that have become a cliché of the organ music of others such as Jacques Charpentier, here sound like a cliché of Messiaen’s own writing in *Dieu parmi nous* (1935), whilst the increased compartmentalisation and repetition of sections that finds its apogee in *Des Canyons aux Étoiles ...* (1971-4) is relied upon to maintain the sense of musical narration.

The most naïve aspect of the *Méditations* is the introduction of (non)-communicable language. Whether Messiaen gets this idea from Arthur Rimbaud’s sonnet *Voyelles* (1871) or from Sonia Delaunay’s ‘simultaneous alphabet, based on the investigation into the correspondence between vowels and colours conducted in the 1920s’, Messiaen’s ‘language’ has very little signification to an audience, much less the player when he is too busy trying to count the values and communicate the notes.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Op. Cit., Szersnovicz, 34.

<sup>123</sup> Above the music Messiaen writes ‘*Dieu est Saint*’.

<sup>124</sup> Op. Cit., Dückting, *Robert and Sonia Delaunay: The Triumph of Colour*, 83. It is possible to detect this thinking in Sonia Delaunay’s paintings from 1913: *Tango-Magic-City*, *Design for*

It is little wonder that Messiaen was still using birdsong in his improvisations of 1977. By this time he was consciously repeating himself, using the motive from the *Offertoire* of *Messe de la Pentecôte*, while pointing to material he would use in later pieces. If his musical language was desperately in need of renewal it did not receive any real succour (after a time) through birdsong. As in the 1940s, his music had to turn to other sources of inspiration to sustain itself. Sonia Delaunay is quoted as saying that:

As with written poetry, it's not the combination of words that counts, it's the mystery of creation that either gives or doesn't give emotion.

The same with colours, it's the poetry, the mystery of an interior life which breaks loose, radiates and communicates itself.

From that point on one can freely create a new language.<sup>125</sup>

Birdsong provided a new resource for Messiaen to expound his vision of the awe and majesty of God. Its use in *Couleurs* and *Chronochromie* does indeed represent a *point sublime* of colour and dissonance; a brimming over of *la vie intérieure* to realise the invisible music of Christ. But to do this more fully Messiaen needed to turn to the all-encompassing monumental works that dominate the remainder of his life's work, and it is through the meaning of the largest of these works - *St François d'Assise* - that we can turn back full circle to the *raison-d'être* of his earliest music.

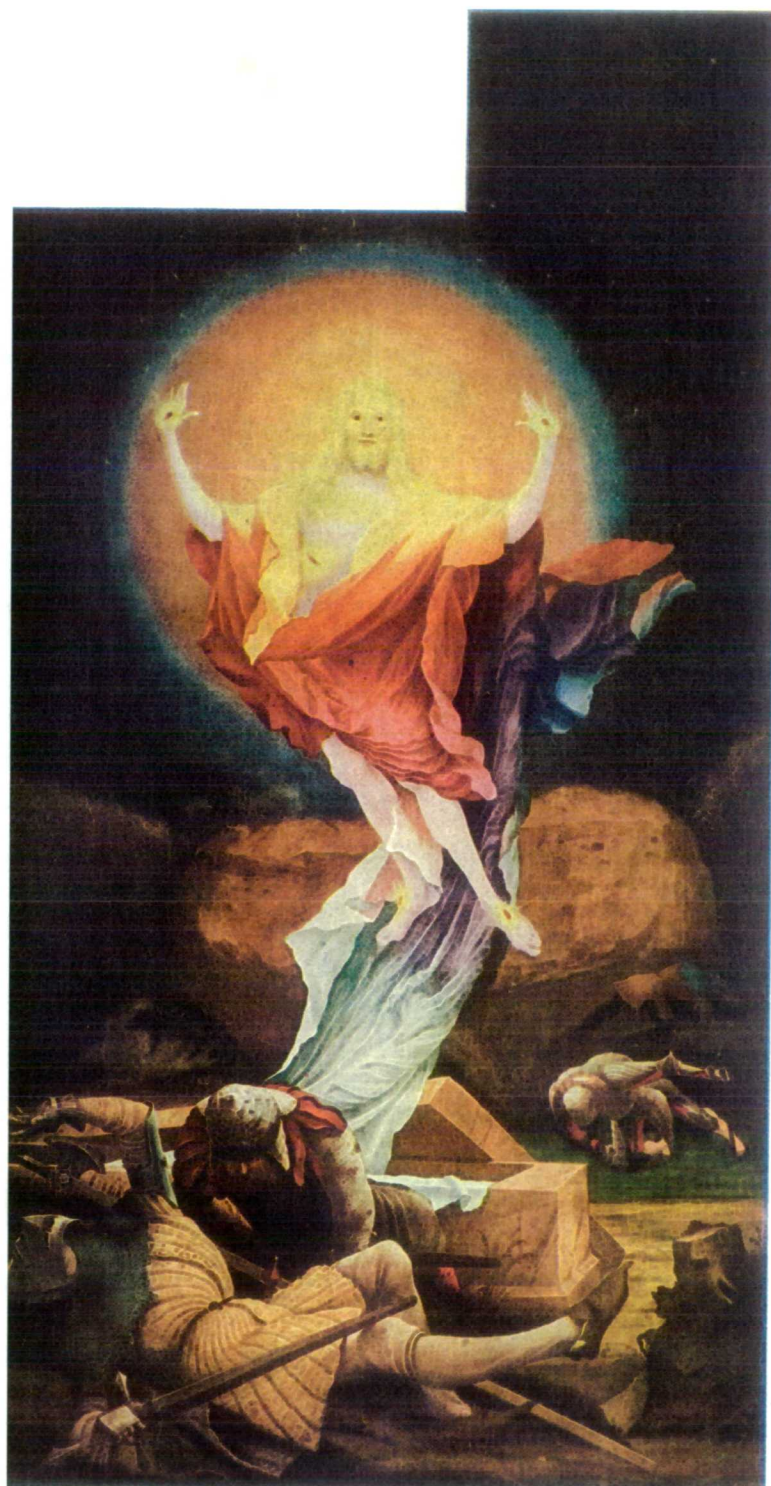
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*Pirelli Poster*, the *Zénith* series (1913-14) and *Dubonnet* (1914). See Op. Cit., *Sonia Delaunay: A Retrospective*, 140-45. Messiaen mentions this Rimbaud sonnet in *TRCO*, Vol. VII, 98.

<sup>125</sup> Sonia Delaunay quoted in 1968, Denise René Gallery catalogue (no page numbers), Cited in Op. Cit., *Sonia Delaunay: A Retrospective*, 108.



**Fig. 5** Matthias Grünewald, Resurrection Panel from  
*Isenheim Altarpiece* (1515)



## Chapter 6: Olivier Messiaen and the Culture of Modernity

The Word and the light are the two ministers of art; light is the splendour of the visible world. By the Word, creation makes itself the light for our spirits: it makes clear its splendours to our intelligence. By the light, creation makes itself for our eyes: it recounts to them the glory of the creator.<sup>1</sup>

The authentic work of art is the expression of the interior life, it is the poetry of the Creator.<sup>2</sup>

I am convinced that joy exists, I am convinced that the invisible exists *more* than does the visible. Joy is beyond pain, the invisible is beyond the visible and beauty is beyond horror.<sup>3</sup>

God dazzles us by an excess of truth. Music carries us to God by default of truth. You speak to God in music: he will respond to you in music. Know the joy of happiness by the sweetness of colour and melody. And this will open

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<sup>1</sup> Op. Cit., Hello, *L'Homme: La Vie, La Science, L'Art* (Perrin edition), 282. 'La Parole et la lumière, sont, les deux ministres de l'Art ... La Parole est la splendeur du monde invisible; la lumière est la splendeur du monde visible. Par la parole, la création se fait lumière pour nos esprits: elle explique ses splendeurs à nos intelligences. Par la lumière, la création se fait parole pour nos yeux: elle leur raconte la gloire du Créateur.'

<sup>2</sup> Sonia Delaunay quoted in 1968, Denise René Gallery catalogue (no page numbers). Cited in Op. Cit., *Sonia Delaunay: A Retrospective*, 107.

<sup>3</sup> Op. Cit., LWT, 39.

for you the secrets, the secrets of Glory! Hear this music which suspends life  
to the steps of heaven. Hear the music of the invisible ...<sup>4</sup>

Messiaen's religious aesthetics of transfiguration reach their apogee in these lines from his opera *St François d'Assise* in which Francis has finally fully realised the truth of his existence. Through these words he encourages humanity to open themselves to the 'secrets of glory', allowing music to be the means of our transfiguration. They encapsulate the themes of truth, love and colour summarised in this study. If this seems repetitive it is meant to be so. Messiaen's music creates a litany of a soul seeking liberation from the service of mortal flesh as much as the wiles of modernity. For Messiaen, the redemptive message of Christ was a message for all peoples and ages but was never more needed than in the twentieth century.

In this chapter I hope to draw together all my ideas in a discussion of Messiaen's Christian mission and modernity. In doing this I give a rough sketch of the modernity into which Messiaen was born and discuss how Messiaen invites us, through use of our imagination, to engage with his ideals of the sublime and glory in the transfiguration of this modernity. In the second part I hope to reveal how his idea of the abyss is used as a metaphor for humanity's 'fallen state' in modernity and how Messiaen attempts to raise humanity up from this worldly mire, using the *fil conducteurs* of filiation and predestination, towards God and eternity. Finally, I introduce Messiaen's opera as the summation of his art and preoccupations. In doing this I propose St Francis as an autobiographical figure for Messiaen that also provides an allegory of his redemptive aesthetics of modernity.

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<sup>4</sup> The Angel singing to St Francis in the 5<sup>th</sup> tableau of *St François d'Assise*, Op. Cit., Programme, 97.

## I

The great American novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald (1896-1940) famously described the 'Jazz Age' as 'a generation grown up to find all Gods dead, all wars fought, all faiths in man shaken'.<sup>5</sup> Such overt pessimism is the flip side of the coin of progress; a polarity intrinsic to modernity and modernism. For modernism could not 'make it new' as Ezra Pound put it, without a deep-seated antipathy and alienation from the past. Everything was to be turned over, old beliefs, customs, and traditions; all required new forms, new relations between artists and their public, and a new aesthetic within which the creative artist could situate himself. The revolt against past culture had to be deeply felt if it was to create a new culture that redrew the Keatsian paradigm of beauty: making its subjectivity identify with the liberation of the individual from the past.

Such a new culture would reflect the modern age, an age of speed, mechanisation and communication.<sup>6</sup> The paradox of such advancement would be the increased atomisation and alienation of the individual, and an aesthetic decadence sunk into self-appeasement, self-awareness, anxiety, and distrust of the future and nostalgia for the past. Such anxieties have resulted in the regression from understanding to an interior politic of meaning and the 'meaning of meaning' that has dominated philosophy and other human sciences for the last century, the cycle of boom and bust that has become the controlling factor of politics and economics, the further decentralisation of the world's peoples by geography, class and income and the move away from centralised systems of belief towards mysticism and altruistic,

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<sup>5</sup> Cited in the preface to Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (London: Penguin, 1990).

benevolent spirituality. Increased fragmentation and alienation found its way into all the arts: the rejection of realism and naturalism was theorised as the expression of the inner self (in the abstract art of Kandinsky), and the movement towards aesthetic functionality (notably by the Bauhaus) gave design and architecture a new *raison d'être*. The reconstitution of the hero and stream of consciousness language in Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), the anti-epic of Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) and the crushing dehumanisation of Joseph K. in Kafka's *The Trial* (1925), the vicissitudes of memory and time in Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* (1913-1922), and finally in music the breakdown and reformation of tonality, recognisable musical syntax (phrases, cadences), genre and developmental narrative - all were a part of the explosion of change known as modernism.

It is easy to forget that these aspects of modernity, described in my thumb-nail sketch, were all part of the early twentieth-century *Zeitgeist* in which Messiaen found himself. Paris in the 1920s and 1930s was a if not *the* Mecca of modernism and the avant-garde in which one could barely avoid new ideas or the characters that generated them. Seen in this context, Messiaen's early music forms part of a backlash against, as much as a continuation and transformation of, musical modernism. Yet even by 1920, mainstream musical modernism was in its death throes, the beginning of a cycle of deaths and resuscitations that would continue throughout the twentieth century. Modernism became the corpse that would not die.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See James Gleick's *Faster: the acceleration of just about everything* (London: Abacus, 1999).

<sup>7</sup> One only has to examine the principal protagonists to see this; the move to neo-classicism in Stravinsky and the systemisation of atonality (serialism) justified by a link to 'tradition' in Schoenberg. One could then cite the failure of integral serialism and the continuing attempts to reinstate modernism in the works of composers such as Nono, Henze, Carter, Tippett, Birtwistle,

By Messiaen's generation *Le Sacre* was not so much shocking as stimulating, and, as I have shown, it is from this work and a diversity of traditions such as that of his teachers Maurice Emmanuel, Dupré and Dukas, along with Tournemire, French symbolism, surrealism, and Thomist and contemporary Catholic thought, that Messiaen 'made it new' in his own spectacularly original ways. He had the ability not only to draw on whatever and whomever he needed, and what came to hand from his intellectual upbringing but also, more importantly, had the inspiration and intelligence to transform the materials of the past. As such Messiaen became a true modernist himself in his ability to synthesise seemingly heterogeneous ideas and, perhaps more remarkably, through his spiritual and religious convictions, Messiaen was able to diagnose the fatalistic condition of modernity that was seemingly the life-blood of mainstream European modernism and propose an antidote to cure it from within.

The play of the old and new, the traditional and the progressive, the conservative and the radical in his art pays tribute to his imagination and originality. Baudelaire wrote that the 'imagination is positively related to the infinite', and throughout Messiaen's life's work we find the lesson that the seemingly impossible becomes possible through an inner renewal, where he remakes the past within his own parameters.<sup>8</sup> For many early twentieth-century artists, art has the power to express an alternative reality, to focus on *the other* or what is beyond our knowledge. For Messiaen, like others, it had a revelatory power that could substantially change the way the individual views himself and the world. Messiaen invites us to use our

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Maxwell Davies, to name but a few composers who, with varying degrees of success, have attempted to re-ignite the torch of modernism.

<sup>8</sup> Op. Cit., Baudelaire, 'The Salon of 1859 [extract]', 300.

imagination and participate in his art through an engagement with his colourful music, and in so doing come to the infinite love and invisible presence of Christ.

On 14<sup>th</sup> August 1978 (Vigil of the Assumption), Messiaen's brother Alain wrote the following:

Olivier, my brother, is, above all, a metaphysical musician, and the metaphysical - in the sense of a Thomist intellectual - is a domain where impunity cannot penetrate. ( ... ) My brother Olivier is a SUBLIME being - one of the greatest beings, not only latterly [*temps dernier*] ... - I want to say, after his death [*défaite définitive*], Olivier, my friend, my brother, will belong to the 10<sup>th</sup> circle of the angels that form the 'chosen' [*Élus*] - and the heavenly city shall ring with the strains of his 'resurrection' from the dead! [*d'entre les morts!*]<sup>9</sup>

Alain Messiaen makes the audacious assertion that Messiaen is a sublime being and in doing so he puts his finger on one of the most important aesthetic tenets of Messiaen's music. Messiaen is a religious modernist and, as a modernist, he takes on the project of modernism's search for a reconnection to a supposedly lost sublime. In the Kantian ideal the sublime is an aesthetic substitute for the experience of God. If the world is indeed as F. Scott Fitzgerald describes it then there is not only a need for art to be sublime in this traditional sense but to reinvigorate the position of God as the sublime, and this is exactly what Messiaen attempts throughout his work. Colour in his music

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<sup>9</sup> Messiaen, Alain, 'Olivier, mon frère ...', *Diapason*, no. 234 (December 1978), 40. Note in this quote how Alain closes off any avenue of criticism, 'a domain where impunity cannot penetrate', in order to render (and keep) the inner sanctum of Messiaen's works critically unassailable.

takes on the role of dazzling the soul of the listener, and in doing so it attempts to subvert or absorb the individual in its radiance, cathartically turning him away from the world to follow the light of Christ. At this moment the soul is given an intimation of the glory of Christ. Messiaen describes this moment of realisation:

Christ was radiant at the moment of the transfiguration. He was radiant at the moment of the resurrection; and we too shall be radiant when we rise again. It was in the mountains whilst contemplating the glaciers of the Meije that I had both the idea and the sensation of the difference between the dazzling whiteness of the snow and the far more dazzling splendour of the sun. And that is how I came to understand that our small earthly lights are nothing in comparison with the light of the resurrection and the light of the transfiguration.<sup>10</sup>

The appreciation of the sublime in Messiaen's aesthetics is the promise embedded in the doctrine of predestination: that we too will be with Christ one day. This is the great Christian hope. What Messiaen is really saying is that the sublime was never lost. Like the sun, God's glory is not hidden from us. This is perhaps one of the radical messages of Messiaen's music.

For many modernists the search for the new and the shocking was an artificial (aesthetic) crusade, at first under the Baudelairian banner of '*épater les bourgeois*', then under banners of a new subjectivity of vision and representation and the negative dialectics of 'tradition and progress'. There is an innate tension between the desire to revitalise the past and an inner knowledge that the moment of the sublime has passed.

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<sup>10</sup> Op. Cit., LWT, 2.



Like the Beethoven of the 'Hammerklavier' sonata Op.106, a work that Messiaen played to his students, Messiaen's music holds out the hope that humanity can be raised up above itself but at the same time acknowledges that this cannot be achieved through the artifice of human creation. Messiaen's music attempts to transcend this aesthetic gridlock through his invocation of colour, timelessness, the static, the circular ('charm of impossibilities') and most importantly the 'truth' of faith. But mostly it seeks transcendence through shock. This is not the shock of the negative that has animated and re-animated modernism from Schoenberg and Stravinsky through to Ligeti and Carter, in a mostly fallacious belief that 'truth' and creativity will always be outside or against the grain of the normative. The various deaths of modernism throughout the twentieth century have left a heap of corpses and a large corpus of art in its wake.<sup>11</sup>

This is an important backdrop for Messiaen, for it is in spite of this that his music both absorbs and renews modernism by parrying the negative with *la joie* and *la gloire*. An interviewer once commented to Messiaen that 'one finds in a number of your works - and even in the last tableau of *St François* - a very strong evocation of the resurrection.' Messiaen gave the following response:

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<sup>11</sup> In fact, (high-) modernist composition has become so much a *lingua franca* that it is now difficult to theorise this music as an aesthetic knee-jerk reaction to various nineteenth-century phenomena (political, sociological and ideological changes). The listener is left wondering in some cases if in fact this background is what the modernist project continues to engage with and perhaps more importantly: why? See Peter Bürger's *The Decline of Modernism* (Cambridge: Polity, 1992) and Jürgen Habermas, 'Modernity versus Postmodernity, *New German Critique*, no. 22, Winter 1981, 3-14; reprinted in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodernism*, ed. Hal Foster as 'Modernity: An Unfinished Project' (Seattle/Washington, Bay Press, 1983), 3-15.

This is because, there also, it acts as a pressing fundamental; the most considerable to take place since creation. At the opposite of certain representations, I do not see the resurrection as an effort made by Christ: it was sudden, like the explosion of an atomic bomb.

The shroud of Turin is a witness. I believe in it, not because this appears to me to be like a miracle, but [because it is] a natural phenomenon. At Hiroshima, the bodies of the victims were found photographed on the walls. In the same way, the resurrection was an atomic shock. Christ was raised in one stroke [*coup*] and his effigy was imprinted on the shroud.

I have tried in my music to render the resurrection - this very concrete and extraordinary thing - in multiple ways, without ever having achieved it. I am not able to render this moment as it was. The resurrection of Christ gives to us all the right to be resurrected also, and the presentiment of this moment particularly disturbs me [*m'émeut*].<sup>12</sup>

In acknowledging that the resurrection cannot be captured, Messiaen pays homage to the awe, majesty and ineffable glory of his subject that is too great for human expression. Nevertheless, he has attempted various snapshots of the event and perhaps the most striking of them belongs to the *Livre du Saint Sacrement* (1984). The epigraph of *la Résurrection du Christ* (no.10) reaches out and asks the metaphorical and rhetorical question of humanity: 'Why seek you amongst the dead him who is

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<sup>12</sup> Op. Cit., Messiaen, *L'Avant Scène Opera*, 11. I translate *m'émeut* here as disturb although it can just mean move. This translation appears more germane in the context of Messiaen talking about the shock of the resurrection.

living?’<sup>13</sup> With this work Messiaen moves from the blackest chordal colours (a legacy of the previous work *les ténèbres*, in which the darkness of the ‘ninth hour’ on the day of the crucifixion has spread all over the earth) to chords with colours that gradually brighten and evoke the luminescence surrounding Christ’s head in Messiaen’s beloved resurrection panel from Matthias Grünewald’s Isenheim Altarpiece [Fig. 5]. Through this work Messiaen comes close to fulfilling his mission ‘to revive the faith in the luminous and positive elements of the Christian religion’.<sup>14</sup> Here is a searing chorale-like vision that slowly transcends the negative, through the agent of modernist dissonance, providing an allegory of our own rising from the death and horror of modernity to new life in Christ’s resurrection. Thus modernism, the corpse that will not die in the twentieth-century, is redeemed by Messiaen’s treatment of this radical subject.

But the piece has an even greater significance: it is a musical revelation of Christ’s glory. The spiritual darkness of the previous work is dispelled: ‘Christ stands up suddenly, in all the force of his glory, with the fortissimo of the organ, and the luminous chords therein radiate [*brillent*] all the colours of the rainbow.’<sup>15</sup> In this piece, as in *L’Ascension*, we are given an allegory of the road to glory that is predestined to us after death. The pain of our becoming, like that prefigured in Messiaen’s *Apparition de l’Église éternelle*, becomes Christological.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> St Luke 24:5.

<sup>14</sup> Op. Cit., Szersnovicz, 34.

<sup>15</sup> Messiaen’s introduction in the score of the *Livre du Saint Sacrement*.

<sup>16</sup> In *The Imitation of Christ*, Thomas à Kempis writes: ‘All the saints endured many trials and temptations, and profited by them; but those who could not resist temptations became reprobate, and fell away.’ Trans. Leo Sherley-Price (London: Penguin, 1952), 40.

*La Gloire* is one of Messiaen's most potent tools in the placation of modernist wiles. Glory is the radiance of power, might, majesty and awe that comes from Christ. It is the presence of God as the *point sublime*. This radiance in Messiaen's thinking has the effect of overpowering the individual and putting all things in subjection to God. Yet in this more Christological concept the individual is not obliterated by glory but retains his identity - it is almost impossible to do otherwise while remaining mortal. In Grünewald's resurrection panel, we become not merely onlookers. The eyes are raised above the sin and drudgery of modernity and *la vie quotidienne*, symbolised in the bottom part of the painting by a soldier retrieving the spoils of war from his vanquished opponent, higher and higher to the radiance of Christ resurrected in the stars.<sup>17</sup> As at the moment of transfiguration when Christ became white like the sun, Christ's face has become almost completely submerged in his aura. Grünewald's Christ is incorporeal but tangible; the invisible has become visible to dispel humanity's doubt.

Grünewald's resurrection panel draws humanity's vision upwards to participate in Christ's glory. In making this connection, the Catholic doctrines of filiation and predestination are present. Messiaen's music attempts to speak of these mysteries and this is why it is most radical. It becomes a critical tool that reminds humanity of the state we should and are predestined to be in; that we should be joyful and glorious, and in being so our lives will be transfigured.

Precious little other music in the twentieth century speaks of these states. Stravinsky's works, from the devotional *Symphony of Psalms* (1930) and the phenomenally repetitive and static *Ave Maria* (1949), the brittle and bony sounds of

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<sup>17</sup> The idea of agility after death appealed to Messiaen and his piece *Force et Agilité des Corps*

*Mass* (1944-8) to the gentle lyricism of *A Sermon, A Narrative and A Prayer* (1960-1) and the monumentalism and austerity of *Canticum sacrum* (1955) and *Threni* (1957-9) all express his faith, but none speak of joy, glory and transcendence. Schoenberg's ascetic *Die Jakobsleiter* (1917-22 rev.1944) and *Moses und Aaron* (1930-32) remain unfinished, perhaps ironically as monuments to what Schoenberg felt unable to say with his musical voice. All these works are erected as much out of a sense of loss as in the hope for a new beginning. As an absolute believer Messiaen would have no truck with such an aesthetic. A work like *la Résurrection du Christ* (no. 10) is a statement of certainty and it is from this uncompromising aesthetic stance that it derives its power.

It is of course very difficult to prove, but one could make a case for the insurgence of the popularity of Messiaen's music in a new and more open generation of post-war listeners socially conditioned to take on board a new kind of spiritual music. Indeed, it may seem odd that in a supposedly secular age there has been so much religious art music. In fact the last century has seen an enormous surge of religious expression exemplified in the often quite static music of Arvo Pärt (*St John Passion*) [1982], John Taverner, Henryk Górecki and Sofya Gubaydulina (*St John Passion*) [2000], as much as the revival of forgotten Renaissance and Medieval music.<sup>18</sup>

The search for the universal can be found in Stockhausen's music from the 'objectivity' of *Kreuzspiel* (1951), through the narcissistic pseudo-profundity of

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*Glorieux* speaks of this mystery.

<sup>18</sup> For every critic that senses sincerity in works by Taverner and Pärt in particular, there will be two or three who detect a sort of pseudo-profundity; a leftover and bankrupt product of pseudo-spirituality from the hippie revolution (like the use of candles and candelabra at dinner parties).

*Hymnen* (1966-67) and *Stimmung* (1968) to his grand-narrative opera *Licht* (1977- ) a long way away from Henze's instrumental *Requiem* (1990-2) or Nono's *Il Canto Sospeso* (1955-6) with its symbolist and lyrical protestations of lament and warning. These works carry and politicise real human feelings of loss and bereavement. Harrison Birtwistle's millennial opera *The Last Supper* (1998-99) resurrects Christ and the disciples to explore the issues of doubt and forgiveness that have haunted humanity for the last 2000 years.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, in the modern world where the Beethovenian sublime has supposedly escaped forever, the *kairos* of restoration and even the restitution of absolutism may have seemed even more imperative to a composer like Messiaen.<sup>20</sup>

What marks Messiaen's music out from these composers is his lack of scepticism, abstraction and irony, another reason why he is perceived as naïve and iconoclastic in the age of modernity. Indeed, a few of the earlier reviews of Messiaen's music wonder at the originality and sincerity of the music. Yet it is in the nature of modern cynicism, to doubt sincerity when one is being told (as in the *Note de l'Auteur*

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<sup>19</sup> The lyrical expression and individuality of a Boulez, Birtwistle, Carter, Maxwell Davies or Fernyhough, while far from religious, has an individual energy and *sui generis* spirituality that is tangible to audiences. While the aural impression of freedom inherent in such music often masks complex structures and systems, it could be seen as a metaphor for a broader creative and spiritual freedom. After all, the artist is liberated from the burden of tradition by modernity to speak in the most personal and subjective ways. The composer is compelled to find new sounds and experiences that have the possibility of changing himself and the way others see their own world.

<sup>20</sup> Op. Cit., *The Imitation of Christ*, 'The present time is most precious; now is the accepted time, now is the day of salvation. It is sad that you do not employ your time better, when you may win eternal life hereafter.' p. 58-9. 'Learn now to die to the world, that you may begin to live with Christ'. p. 59.

to *La Nativité*) 'I am being sincere'.<sup>21</sup> For Messiaen, faith is the well-spring from which the integrity of his music flows. But faith is more than this; it becomes an ideological stick with which to beat off the wiles of modernism. Suspicion and weariness of progress had been an integral part of the modernist project and with Messiaen suddenly this notion, like a near exhausted runner, suffers the cathartic transformation of near-cardiac arrest. Material satisfaction could only fulfil the life of the world, but what if Christ should arrive and find his people dancing around the golden calf, ignorant of their spiritual life laid waste? The message of *Le Banquet Céleste* was to feed the inner person to enable him to become one with Christ. In employing the notion of staticism, as a palliative to modernist speed, Messiaen subverts the aesthetics of modernity, and in making this concept Christological he transforms the reception of his own modernism musical language.

With *Le Banquet Céleste*, Messiaen had distilled the slow-moving religious exoticism of *Parsifal* into a drama of 25 bars - he had literally 'made it new' by working with precedents: the octatonic scale, improvisation, juxtaposition and 'liquidation'. All that was required was an aesthetic and artistic sincerity to continue the cult of 'Religion and Art'. It was the duty of such an artist to 'to give to our century the spring water for which it thirsts', or to close the wound of modernity by taking the causative spear in his hands and using it as a healing implement.<sup>22</sup>

*Le Banquet Céleste* inaugurates Messiaen's personal vision of glory; a reflection of an infinitely rich interior life, nourished by the plays of Shakespeare and the poetry of his mother from childhood, constant reading of theology and the Bible

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<sup>21</sup> Op. Cit., Messiaen's *Note de l'Auteur* to *La Nativité*: 'Emotion and sincerity first of all. But transmitted to the listener by sure and clear means.'

<sup>22</sup> *TMLM*, 8. Op. Cit., Steinberg.

and most particularly through playing the organ and improvising at La Trinité. 'Do not forget my magnificent instrument, the Cavaillé-Coll at the church of La Trinité!'<sup>23</sup> 'I love my organ! It is for me a brother, a son, and I would [*je serais*] be in despair to be separated from it.'<sup>24</sup> This instrument was Messiaen's weekly muse, a perpetual well-spring of thoughts, ideas and colours that he would bathe in weekly in the liturgy. Thomas Merton has written:

The climate in which monastic prayer flowers is that of the desert, where the comfort of man is absent, where the secure routines of man's city offer no support and where prayer must be sustained by God in the purity of faith. Even though he may live in a community, the monk is bound to explore the inner waste of his own being as a solitary. The Word of God which is his comfort is also his distress. The liturgy, which is his joy and which reveals to him the Glory of God, cannot fill a heart that has not previously been humbled and emptied by dread. *Alleluia* is the song of the desert.<sup>25</sup>

La Trinité was the oasis in the modern desert of Paris in which Messiaen could seek succour in the word of God as much as in the revelation of Christ's glory in the liturgy. It is Messiaen's contact with this church and with the organ here that is at the heart of his inner life. It is from this as much as from any cultural source outlined (or not) in my work that the true authenticity of Messiaen's art stems. Sonia Delaunay has stated that: 'The authentic work of art is the expression of the interior life, it is the

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<sup>23</sup> Op. Cit., *L'Avant Scène Opera*, 17.

<sup>24</sup> Messiaen in *Du Côté de la Trinité*, no. 2, March 1991 quoted in P. Francis Kohn (priest of La Trinité), 'Olivier Messiaen, un homme de foi', *Du Côté de la Trinité*, no. 7 June 1992, 1. This is the 'parish newsletter' of La Trinité.



poetry of the creator.<sup>26</sup> In Messiaen's case, it is the inner realisation of the joy and glory of the creator dilated towards the exterior through music.<sup>27</sup>

## II

If all the gods were dead and materialism had triumphed over alienated art, then what was needed was a recentering of humanity, a move towards an idea that would collectively bind the disparate threads of society. The redemption of society through art had been one of the principal tenets of Wagner's art, which had a profound effect on French culture from Baudelaire to Sartre and from Gounod to Tournemire. It is therefore unsurprising that Messiaen should take up this project and reinvigorate it through the Wagnerian mantle of the monumental work.

I've already argued in my first chapter that Messiaen's music attempts to engender a cathartic recognisance of our fallen human state with repentance and redemption following as the endgame. It is within this telos that the idea of the *l'abîme* (the abyss) has great signification in Messiaen's works. The abyss is a concept borrowed from the Bible (i.e. in Habakkuk and 'The Fifth Trumpet' from the Apocalypse) but more specifically in Messiaen's case from the nineteenth-century theologian and writer Ernest Hello.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Op. Cit., Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, 29.

<sup>26</sup> Sonia Delaunay quoted in 1968: Denise René Gallery catalogue (no page numbers). Cited in Op. Cit., *Sonia Delaunay: A Retrospective*, 107.

<sup>27</sup> Here I paraphrase Reverdy who states that lyricism is 'an explosion towards the unknown, an essential explosion of being expanded by emotion towards the exterior'. Op. Cit., *Le Gant de Crin*, 37.

<sup>28</sup> 'The Fifth Trumpet' is Chapter 9 of the *Revelation of St John the Divine*. See also Pierre Reverdy's poem 'Abîme', *Les ardoisses du toit* (1918) in *Plupart du temps I*, 178.

Hello was an enormously important figure for writers of the nineteenth-century Catholic literary revival and was one of Tournemire's favourite authors.<sup>29</sup> In his book on César Franck, Tournemire cites a lengthy quote from Hello lamenting the status of art:

Art has completely lost its head. After seeking its models in shadowy regions, after forgetting that the sun is its domain, *after attempting the apotheosis of evil* ... [Tournemire's italics], after trying to separate truth from beauty, it turned against beauty ... Having given itself a mortal blow, art wished to end it all. Having persuaded men that disorder, in other words the false, constituted beauty, it cried out, according to its own mad logic: the beautiful is the ugly! ... Greek art was unaware of this folly. Its beauty is to be found entirely in a state of repose ... Art, in order to find this serenity, must rediscover both lofty peaks and profoundest depths. Foam is always moving to and fro, agitated, carried away, impetuous: but the foam is not the ocean.<sup>30</sup>

Amid the exhortation to the staticism of Greek art, as an antidote to worldly dialectical art, and the creation of a new sublime in art that is equated with Christianity, is the idea that Christianity is the rock around which the flotsam and jetsam of human misery and history floats. The problem for Hello (and Tournemire) is doubt:

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<sup>29</sup> See Op. Cit., Fauquet, *Catalogue de l'œuvre de Charles Tournemire*.

<sup>30</sup> I repeat this quote from Chapter 1 but use it to a different end here. Op. Cit., Tournemire, *César Franck*, 1-2. Quote from Op. Cit., Hello, *L'Homme: La Vie, La Science, L'Art*, 19-22.

Must we still suffer from *doubt*? An evil, more frightening than paganism!

Does the spirit of the eighteenth century still obstinately stalk us?

Doubt! which Hello calls the 'poison bringing death to all the workings of the mind'.<sup>31</sup>

Here we have it in a nutshell. The project of the Enlightenment had failed. Scientific hope and rationalisation have enslaved the mind of man and caused him to doubt himself. *Kairos* has arrived - one must act now if society is to be redeemed. This is why Messiaen sees himself (in *TMLM*) as the redeemer, and he cites Hello, 'There is no one great except him to whom God speaks, and in the moment in which God speaks to him.'<sup>32</sup> If humanity is in the abyss of despair, then Messiaen as 'a great artisan and a great Christian' was needed or indeed predestined to take this role.<sup>33</sup>

The first time he uses the concept of the abyss is in his *Quatuor pour la fin du Temps*.<sup>34</sup> In the preface to the work Messiaen writes:

*Abîme des Oiseaux*. Clarinet alone. The abyss, it is time, with its sadnesses, its lassitudes. The birds, it is the opposite of Time; it is our desire for light, the stars, rainbows and jubilant vocalises.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Op. Cit., Tournemire, *César Franck*, 2. Quote from Op. Cit., Hello, *L'Homme: La Vie, La Science, L'Art*, 23. Again, I have used this quote in Chapter 1, but here I use it to a different end.

<sup>32</sup> *TMLM*, 8. Messiaen quotes Hello's *Paroles de Dieu: Réflexions sur quelques textes sacrés*, texte présenté par François Angélier (Grenoble: Jérôme Millon, 1992), 196 and 197.

<sup>33</sup> *TMLM*, 8. I say predestined because of Messiaen's belief in the Catholic doctrine of predestination.

<sup>34</sup> See also David Morris, 'A semiotic investigation of Messiaen's *Abîme des Oiseaux*', *Music Analysis*, vol. 8, no. 1-2 (1989), 125-158. Morris's pitch-class set investigation of this work may have the correct numbers, but his article fails to relate these to any cultural, contextual or hermeneutic analysis.

Time here is made synonymous with the garish reality and mundaneness of modernity from which the soul must flee towards the light and glory of Christ.<sup>36</sup> Once again the images of 'light, the stars, rainbows' evokes the mysterious and disturbing moment of the resurrection as depicted by Grünewald, whilst the *style oiseau* 'jubilant vocalises' symbolise the agility and improvisatory freedom of the soul liberated from its mortal coil.<sup>37</sup>

Why is this movement for a solo instrument (clarinet)? The answer lies in an intimate recognition that the soul is a desert 'where prayer must be sustained by God in the purity of faith'.<sup>38</sup> It is the abyss or the 'inner waste of his own being' that is heard in the resonances of the instrument at the start (marked *desolé*). Yet even here the cross is exposed in the familiar motive (marked **X**) from works like *Poèmes pour Mi*, symbolising the idea that even in despair (at Stalag VIIIA for instance) Christ is present:

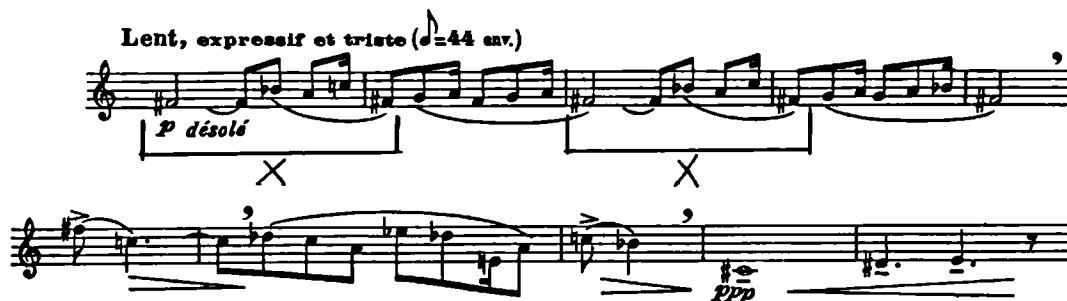
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<sup>35</sup> Messiaen, *Quatuor pour la fin du Temps*, *Note de l'Auteur*, I.

<sup>36</sup> Messiaen seems to be referring back to both *Le Nombre Léger* and *La Mort du Nombre* where time [*le nombre*] dies to *la durée*.

<sup>37</sup> Messiaen had already depicted this in *Force et agilité* (*Les Corps Glorieux*).

<sup>38</sup> Op. Cit., Merton, 29.

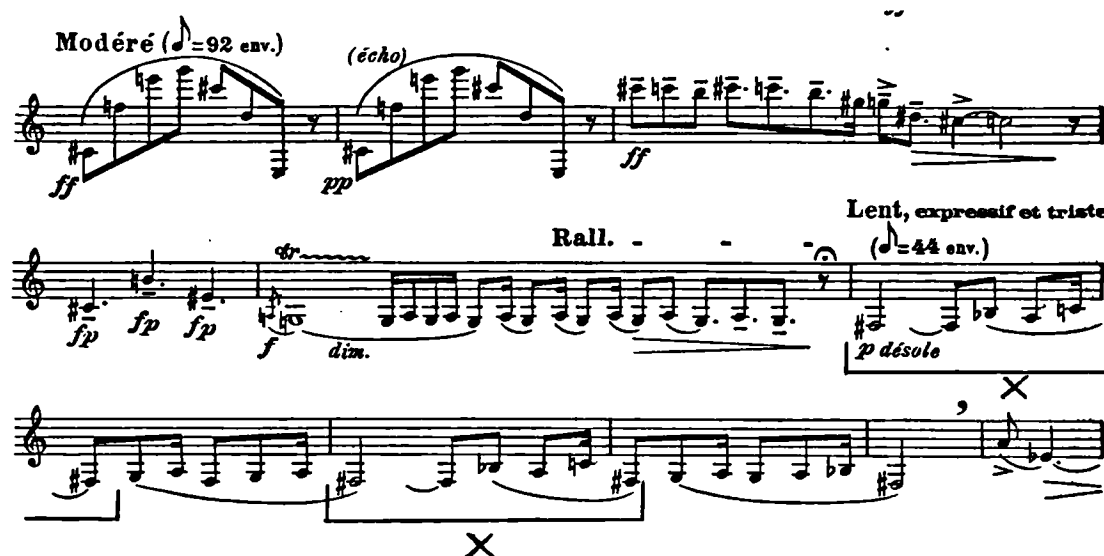
Ex. 110 *Abîme des Oiseaux* (opening)

The soul is laid bare to be filled with the voice of God symbolised in birdsong from b. 14-19 and in a second strophe from b. 20; moving outside the realm of measurable time, using free flights of semiquavers, towards a new surrealist 'higher reality' in b. 24.<sup>39</sup> These jubilant vocalises are the Alleluias that emerge from this wasteland of the individual's soul.<sup>40</sup> Abrupt leaps follow in b. 25-6 symbolising the bird's joy of agility in the 'light, stars and rainbows' of the apocalypse, an image of our own incorporeal agility after death.<sup>41</sup> Slowly and inexorably the music in b. 27-9 returns to the deep abyss of the desert, this time an octave lower:

<sup>39</sup> In *Paroles de Dieu*, Hello states: 'Firstly one remarks that the birds are mixed with the quadrupeds; mixed because, says Richard of Saint Victor, birds are *la vie intérieure*; the quadruped is *la vie extérieure*'. p. 55.

<sup>40</sup> In this I have drawn freely from Thomas Merton Op. Cit., 'Alleluia is the song of the desert'. p. 29.

<sup>41</sup> See the *Préface* to Messiaen's *Quatuor*. Messiaen calls these abrupt leaps a 'change of Register', where pitches undergo a process of octave displacement. He states that this technique is present in Berg's *Lyric Suite* (a work which he possessed in Stalag VIIIA) and Jolivet's *Mana*. *TMLM*, 36.

Ex. 111 *Abîme des Oiseaux* b. 25-35

Christ is still present (in the 'cross' motive) and from this comes one last defiant attempt to break free in b. 40 from the soul's 'sadnesses and lassitudes'.<sup>42</sup> The return to the vocalises in a shortened third strophe (b. 40-3) again uses the 'change of register' idea from b. 25-6 which, together with a final appearance of the 'cross' motive (last four notes) defiantly intimates that the possibility of joy in Christ is always present, even in the despair of the abyss. St Thomas à Kempis has written: 'Who has a fiercer struggle than he who strives to conquer himself? Yet this must be our chief concern - to conquer self, and by daily growing stronger than self, to advance in holiness.'<sup>43</sup> The idea is that God can help humanity raise itself out of its own abyss of the misery of modernity. Even though through our mortality we are doomed to return to this state, Messiaen intimates in the final section of his work that change has occurred and that the alternative reality that seemed impossible at the beginning of the piece has become possible. Thomas Merton writes that:

<sup>42</sup> *Préface* to the *Quatuor*, I.

<sup>43</sup> Op. Cit., Thomas à Kempis, 31.

From the abyss there comes, unaccountably, the mysterious gift of the Spirit sent by God to make all things new, to transform the created and redeemed world, and to re-establish all things in Christ.<sup>44</sup>

For music to transform the individual is one of its great gifts: the project of cathartically transfiguring humanity in the image of Christ is at the core of Messiaen's poetics.

Messiaen returned to the abyss in *Les Mains de L'Abîme* [*Livre d'Orgue*]. The epigraph he uses for this organ work is taken from Habakkuk 3, 10: 'The Abyss has released its cry; the depths have lifted their two hands'. In this apocalyptic chapter of Habakkuk, God raises rivers and mountains against the wicked. It is worth quoting at length Hello's commentary on this exact text that Messiaen chose:

The Abyss! Of the things in this word! It is one of those that returns the most often in literature. The soul is an abyss: the depths are the place where the soul cries towards the heights: *de Profundis! de Profundis!* If man releases a cry towards God, this cry is inevitably *de Profundis*. When the depths lift their two hands, the ocean, agitated by the tempest which opens itself before the passing cry, like the Red Sea before Moses, lays itself bare. The precipice releases its first cry, because the depths have lifted their two hands. The human soul has its precipice that has not seen the light: it has these unexplained retreats, habitually covered by great waters. But there comes a moment when the depths lift their two hands. The prayer launches towards the sky the powers of the soul stirred up [*soulevées*] by the tempest, and hidden

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<sup>44</sup> Op. Cit., Merton, 28.

precipices see [*voient*] the sun from all perspectives [*regards*] for the first time. Their first view [*regard*] is a cry that soars towards immensity.<sup>45</sup>

For Hello, only the light of God penetrates the darkest recesses of the human soul. This image of a precipice covered by great waters seems to suggest that our conscious mind, distracted by the world, understands very little of our true nature. Such precipices are like rocky fissures for the mind to grasp the way we present ourselves to the world and our current state of spiritual health. But the greater abyss, our unconscious nature, remains ignored and covered. Hello looks forward to a moment of enlightenment, a moment when the waters will part; a veritable *éclairage de l'âme* in which we will be raised up to understand our profound nature. The sense that the *promesse de bonheur* of the Enlightenment has failed pervades Hello's work. It is to this profundity [*de Profundis* - Out of the Depths (Psalm 130, v. 1)] that Hello and Messiaen refer. Ideology has failed to stop this cry from the depths. For Hello and Messiaen, humanity can only be raised up through faith and art to a recognisance of God.

In his commentary on *Les Mains de l'Abîme*, Messiaen refers to Hello's commentary on Psalm 42: 'Listen, you who hold fast, below encountered terrors; tell me the route which leads to the place where prayer is understood',<sup>46</sup> and

"The abyss calls the abyss" [by the voice of its cataracts], that is to say that the abyss of man calls the abyss of God. According to the admirable commentary

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<sup>45</sup> Op. Cit., Hello, *Paroles de Dieu*, 131-2.

<sup>46</sup> Op. Cit., Hello, *Paroles de Dieu*, 118, quoted by Messiaen in *TRCO*, Vol. III, 187. In this one can hear an echo of Brother Leon's opening line in *St François d'Assise*: 'I fear, I fear the route ...'. Op. Cit, Programme, 84.



of Hello: 'The high abyss does not respond when the lower abyss calls for it to be exposed [*à découvert*]. The lower abyss must symbolise death [in its depths], so that the high abyss represents life [in its heights]'.<sup>47</sup>

Messiaen then explains that:

... I understand this text, not as the ocean like certain commentators, but as the gulf and precipices of the mountains - it must above all be taken symbolically: it is the great call of God toward human misery. This is why I play the hands of the abyss at the times of penitence ...'

*Les Mains de l'Abîme!* What a beautiful title! One finds it already in my piano work *Régard du Silence* [*Vingt Régards*], in my *Messe de la Pentecôte: les langages de feu*, and further on in the *Livre d'Orgue: les yeux dans les roues* ... these pretexts, which enrapture a surrealist, might take their place in any poem of André Breton or any painting of Max Ernst. In this the greatest realities repose: Reality with a capital R and Truth with a capital T [*Verités*].<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Messiaen quoted in François Angelier, 'Hello, L'Explosion de l'Unité', in Op. Cit., Hello, *Paroles de Dieu*, 41. The complete original text from which Messiaen borrows is on p. 118 of *Paroles de Dieu*. In *TRCO*, Vol. III, 187, Messiaen quotes this passage of Hello again 'The high abyss ...'. 'Cataracts' refers to the fall of water.

<sup>48</sup> *TRCO*, Vol. III, 188-9. In Op. Cit., LWT, 39-40, Messiaen states, 'This piece depicts the great cry of human misery and it depicts that thing which is so gentle, God's response and the consolation that He brings. This piece was written in front of a real abyss, in front of the winding torrent of the Romanche river in the mountain pass in the Hautes-Alpes known as the Inverné Gorge.'

This is one of Messiaen's most dramatic and surreal compositions. The 'Cry of the Abyss' (ex. 76, p. 170) is followed at b. 14-22 by the conjunction of vox humana (with tremolo), nazard 2<sup>2/3</sup> and bourdon 16 timbres in their lowest register, which seems to depict the desert of the human soul [*Cela évoque ces voix étranges et graves que l'on entend dans les Lamaseries du Tibet*] and the conjunction of the highest sounds of the tierce 1<sup>3/5</sup> and the piccolo 1 'field-cricket' to evoke 'the abyss of human misery calling the abyss of divine forgiveness'.<sup>49</sup> In the third section (b. 25-35), an extended variation of b. 14-22, the 1 ft piccolo (the highest sound on the organ) and tierce 1<sup>3/5</sup> is heard with pedal bourdon 32 (the lowest sound), depicting, as it were, the extreme distance between the cry of man and God. Finally, a recapitulation of the initial cry (b. 38) repeats the need for fulfilment and perhaps signals a gateway to the *rapprochement* between God and nature in the next piece, *Chants d'Oiseaux*.<sup>50</sup>

As if this were not a sign of the transformative and transfiguring power of the light of God, Messiaen uses the idea of the abyss again in *Et Expecto Resurrectionem Mortuorum* where in the first movement an angular melody rises from the depths to be coloured at the end by added resonances that signify the cry of the abyss.<sup>51</sup> Thereafter bells, gongs and tam-tams serve as surreal timbral reminders of the abyss while the profundity of resonance and silence seemingly awaits a response from God.

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<sup>49</sup> TRCO, Vol. III, 191.

<sup>50</sup> In this final section b. 37-45, Messiaen reorders and extends the material used in b. 1-11. As in the first section, the 'Cry of the Abyss' is used 6 times to underline emphatically the need of humanity for God.

<sup>51</sup> Messiaen's note in *Et Expecto Resurrectionem Mortuorum*, 13 and 15.

Colours, birds, and the abyss find their apogee in *Couleurs de la Cité Céleste*, where they are linked with apocalyptic texts and timbres (trombones, tuba, tuned and untuned percussion), and then with 'mountains' in *La Transfiguration de Notre-Seigneur Jésus-Christ*, where the abyss as an icon has seemingly disappeared to be replaced by a prolonged meditation on light. Nevertheless the abyss's shadow is still present: the spiritual heights can only be assailed from below. In this work the listener is gradually led by the hand up a mountain to witness the brilliance of the transfiguration, acknowledge and recognise the power and splendour of God in the natural world of light and lightning, appreciate our filiation to God and acknowledge our need of grace and '*la clarté de la gloire futur*', and finally, near the summit, the listener is led to an understanding that we need to be transfigured and that it is our predestination to be like Christ on earth and to be with him in heaven.<sup>52</sup>

The chorales at the end of *La Transfiguration* contain some of Messiaen's most searing music. The fourteenth piece is entitled *Choral de la Lumière de Gloire* and takes as its epigraph: 'Saviour, I love the beauty of your house, and the place where lives your glory.' (Psalm 26:8) It is a feature of this piece and of the whole of *La Transfiguration* that Messiaen's chorales suddenly change from complex to simple triadic chords, an effect which only serves to irradiate further the surrounding musical

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<sup>52</sup> In a conversation with Edith Walter a year after *La Transfigurations*'s first performance (7 June 1969) in *Harmonie* (June/July 1970), 23, Messiaen sheds a different light on the 'summit': 'For me this work is more important than the others. Firstly because its message (*the transfiguration*) is to my mind the highest moment in the life of Christ. [And then echoing Marmion, he continues] The entire life of Christ is admirable, but constantly its human aspect hides his divinity. But on the day of the transfiguration, all of a sudden, Christ did not need a miracle, his divinity brightened and was illuminated. I have always found that this is the summit of the history of our planet, but I have never dared to treat this subject. I wanted to wait until I was over 60 to risk it.'

landscape. In the final 8 bars of the work (ex. 112, see enclosed score) where the inexorable rise on the word *gloriae* leads finally to the absolute summit of an E major chord on *tuae!*

There are several interesting aspects in this section. It may seem like a small detail, but throughout the chorales there are some very unusual voice-leading relationships in the orchestration where orchestral parts swap seemingly for no reason. For instance in this final section notice (in the 6<sup>th</sup> bar from the end) how the first and third flutes swap registers, or in the 4<sup>th</sup> bar from the end how oboe 3, trumpet 3 and the mezzo-sopranos leap a seventh bisecting the soprano, tpt 1 and 2 and oboe 1 and 2 parts. Also note how the swapping of parts in the ante-penultimate chord (horns, clarinets, altos, and violas playing d<sup>1</sup> and g<sup>1</sup>#) nearly literally wrap themselves around the trombones, bassoons, tenors and baritones, and cellos (playing d<sup>1</sup>, e<sup>1</sup> and f<sup>1</sup>). What is remarkable about all this is that there is some sort of *Klangfarbenmelodie* going on inside Messiaen's chorales.<sup>53</sup> The movement of colours (signifying the presence of God) inside Messiaen's chords (again far from static) seems like an allegory of the movement of God inside the soul of man. If the soul of man is the house of God (from the epigraph) then this passage can be understood as a gradual realisation that Christ's glory is within each individual.<sup>54</sup> This glory becomes more pronounced as Messiaen's chords become more complex and dissonant (on the word *gloriae*) moving towards God (*tuae!*).

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<sup>53</sup> This sort of orchestral writing occurs to a lesser degree in *Couleurs* in the *Alleluia du Saint-Sacrement* chorale at 9 bars after fig. 32 and also in *Chronochromie*.

<sup>54</sup> In this Messiaen is providing an answer as does Christ, who when asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God should come, stated that: 'The Kingdom of God is within you'. *The Bible*, St Luke 17:20-21. 'The Kingdom of God is within you' (v. 21) is quoted in à Kempis Op. Cit., 67.

## 346a

**12**

[illegible]

The effect of this complexity of resonance is achieved harmonically and through the orchestration. While the rest of the orchestra plays chords of increasing complexity from three-note chords to the eight-note 'turning chords' in b. 5 and 6 of the example, the 2 piccolos and 3 flutes play notes generally at least an octave or more above the rest of the texture.<sup>55</sup> Their notes belong to other transpositions of mode 3, playing with and amplifying the triadic resonances in the chords below and providing a clearly audible halo [*auréole*] above the rest of the orchestra. The complexity of the turning chords, together with added resonances, throws the final two E major chords on *tuae!* into stark relief, so that these chords sound even more dazzling. The image created is one of the radiant glory of heaven - the house where the soul wishes to reside - an image not merely of praise but of a love radiated from God to Christ to the believer. The house also represents the human body, just as it did in *La Maison* (*Poèmes pour Mi*), and therefore these chords symbolise an ultimate transfiguration of modernity through a cathartic realisation that the presence of Christ and the kingdom of God are within humanity.

The arrival on the summit of *La Transfiguration* is like a victory over oneself: a rewarding triumphal vista after the toil up the mountain from the abyss. In the dialogues between Christ and a disciple that dominate Books 3 and 4 of his *Imitation of Christ*, à Kempis (Christ) writes: 'To triumph over self is the perfect victory. For whoever so controls himself that his passions are subject to reason, and his reason

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<sup>55</sup> See also tableau 2/p.39 of *St François d'Assise* where 3 flutes, 3 piccolos and the alto flute play resonances above an A flat major chord. In *TRCO*, Vol. VII, Messiaen reveals his 12 sets of 'turning chords' and their corresponding colours. The chords in b. 5 and 6 of ex. 112 are the first set of chords in Messiaen's table (transposed). See *TRCO*, Vol. VII, 166.

wholly subject to Me, is master both of himself and of the world.’<sup>56</sup> As in *Apparition de l’Église éternelle* there is no glory without the trials of mortality. Messiaen may want to take us beyond the summit, but this can only be achieved either through our death or with the aid of the imagination.

These E major chords invoke the same idea of distance mentioned in Chapter 1 where, like Durtal, who perceives the glorious illumination through stained-glass windows of a Gothic Cathedral from a transept, we can meditate on our own distance from God. This is what Messiaen meant when he spoke of ‘the difference between the dazzling whiteness of the snow and the far more dazzling splendour of the sun. And that is how I came to understand that our small earthly lights are nothing in comparison with the light of the resurrection and the light of the transfiguration.’<sup>57</sup>

### III

The transfiguration becomes an allegorical path that we are left to follow with Messiaen as our spiritual guide. Similar trajectories occur in *Des canyons aux étoiles ...* (1971-74) and the *Livre du Saint Sacrement* (1984) where we move out of the life of Christ (I-XI) into the church of Christ (XII-XVIII). The project of realisation, cathartic self-revelation and redemption is omnipresent in Messiaen’s music. Just as in Marmion’s *Le Christ dans ses Mystères*, Messiaen’s *Livre du Saint Sacrement* reveals to us the life and mystery of Christ, passing through the crucifixion and the resurrection in the most striking music, to the presence of Christ in the Eucharist (VIII-XIV) where Christ is ingested through the symbolism of birdsong as

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<sup>56</sup> Op. Cit., à Kempis, 167-8.



‘the joy of the grace’ [*la joie de la grâce*], to become part of us and transfigure us from within.

It is this dynamic of recognisance, catharsis and redemption that dominates Messiaen’s largest work, his opera *St François d’Assise* (1975-83), and that acts as an allegory for the plight of modern man and his resurrection in Christ. While Messiaen’s *tableaux* in this work are often described as ‘static’, this seems completely opposed to the dynamic progression of Francis’s life as represented in the opera.<sup>58</sup> Francis is gradually spiritually transformed, in Messiaen’s libretto and music, from being a doubting mortal through a struggle with himself to becoming Saint Francis, and he is finally elevated to the glory of afterlife.

‘Staticism’ would likewise be opposed to the way leitmotives are used throughout the work. From *Chronochromie*, *Couleurs*, *Catalogue d’Oiseaux*, *La Transfiguration*, *Canyons* and the three small late orchestral works (*Un Vitrail et des Oiseaux*, *La ville d’en haut* and *Un sourire*) there is a gradual atrophication of form. Even by *Couleurs* the extended sections of music found in *Réveil des Oiseaux* have all but disappeared. In *Couleurs* Messiaen crowds his scores with short-lived episodes of birds and other aspects (coloured chords, plainchant, the abyss, chorales etc.). What results is a form based on iconic segments that can function like larger-scale *personnages rythmiques*. Some icons are transformed through time, but others merely

<sup>57</sup> Op. Cit., LWT, 2.

<sup>58</sup> In Op. Cit., Programme, 62, George Benjamin states in a conversation with an anonymous interviewer: ‘It is true that it [*St François*] is a static work, above all theatrically: It has neither a love scene, nor combat nor murder.’ While it is true that these actions do not take place in the way that they might in an opera by Verdi, there is a scene revealing spiritual love between the leper and St Francis in which Francis is fighting or struggling with himself, and this scene is far from theatrically static.

appear, make their contribution and disappear. This sectionalisation of Messiaen's compositions becomes so prevalent that by the time of *Un Vitrail et des Oiseaux* Messiaen is almost writing pastiche Messiaen.

What he needed was a way of making the plethora of sections in his music more meaningful. With the return to leitmotives (he had used them in the *Vingt Régards sur l'Enfant-Jésus* forty years before) Messiaen had a way of giving small sections of his music a reflective meaning that had a narrative function. In such an enormous work as *St François* it would not have been possible to continue in the same vein as, say, in *Couleurs* - this would have been completely confusing.

In his opera there are leitmotives for characters i.e. Francis, the Leper, Br Masée, the Angel, and for ideas i.e. *thème de la Joie*, *thème de solennité*, *thème de la Fauvette*, and it is the way these are interlaced and used much like *personnages rythmiques* that aids the on-stage drama. St Francis's theme has a particular significance in the opera not only in the way it changes but the way it impinges upon other characters. It is marked by three obvious features: an arpeggiated quality, a tendency to turn back on itself, and the same orchestration of unison strings at each appearance. The transformation of Francis's theme is meant to represent his own spiritual change; a transformation that is the subject of the opera. Here is the way Messiaen writes it:

Ex. 113 St Francis's theme



In my discussion of Messiaen's opera I understand St Francis both as an allegorical figure representing humanity and as a reflection of Messiaen's own life-long search for God. The gradual process of Francis's transfiguration on stage from man to saint and on after death is meant to confront the consciousness of the audience and so bring them to an awareness that they, too, should follow Francis's example.

Such dynamism is present in the first tableau *La Croix*. The stage directions tell us that 'the stairs have a number of ways and ascend very high. At the top of the stairs, a great black cross stands out against the blue sky.'<sup>59</sup> The tripartite format of this tableau allows Francis to conduct Br Leon towards his and our own personal cross. We know this already because just after Br Leon has sung his opening line 'I fear, I fear, I fear the route ...' he sings the following permutation of St Francis's theme even before Francis's theme appears on p.10 (with an accompaniment that is almost completely in unison):<sup>60</sup>

**Ex. 114** Brother Leon tableau 1/p.4



Each time Br Leon states: 'I fear ...', Francis stops him and tells him that the way to *la joie parfaite* is an interior progression.<sup>61</sup> Behind Francis's words about power [*la force*] human conditions, intelligence and virtue is the famous passage in St Paul's

<sup>59</sup> Op. Cit., Programme, 84.

<sup>60</sup> Br Leon's opening line 'I fear, I fear, I fear the route ...' Op. Cit., Programme, 84. For ease of reference, I use page numbers rather than figures in the score.

<sup>61</sup> Op. Cit., Programme, 84. This pattern of doubt and reassurance returns in the fourth tableau (p. 92) and the fifth (p. 97).

first letter to the Corinthians 13:2: 'And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could move mountains, and have not love, I am nothing'.<sup>62</sup> Yet love is not mentioned, only *la joie parfaite*.

Francis then gives an allegory of a traveller rejected after a long and arduous journey, a preview of what will happen to the Angel later on in the opera, and maintains that one must withstand any hardship for the love of Christ. Finally Christ, represented by the chorus, sings: 'Those who wish to walk in my steps must renounce themselves, take up their Cross and follow me.'<sup>63</sup> The allegory is clear, humanity must renounce worldly vanity and mundane reality, most imitate and follow Christ and become transfigured in his image through suffering.

Of course this sort of self-effacement is a particular topos of medieval Christian writings. In Ch. 8 of the St Francis's *Fioretti* is written:

At last, listen to this conclusion, Br Leon: the greatest grace that Christ accorded his friends was that of victory over oneself, and to bear pains, injuries, affronts and discomforts willingly for the love of Christ. From no other gift are we able to be glorified, because the other gifts do not come from us. But in the cross of sorrow and affliction we are able to be glorified, because it is to us that the Apostle said: "I do not put my glory and my joy in anything but the cross of Jesus-Christ!"<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> The King James Authorised Version of *The Bible* substitutes the word 'charity' for 'love'.

<sup>63</sup> Op. Cit., Programme, 86.

<sup>64</sup> Op. Cit., Programme, 29. This is the last line sung by St Francis in tableau 1. Programme, 86.

Here yet again we have the idea of victory over the self and suffering: ‘Suffer with Christ, and for Christ, if you wish to reign with Christ’.<sup>65</sup> Francis’s search for ‘*la joie parfaite*’ is the arduous road that we are set upon also. But this section contains a larger idea, described by à Kempis who opines: ‘If only we were completely dead to self, and free from inner conflict, we could savour spiritual things, and win experience of heavenly contemplation.’<sup>66</sup> The idea that we must undergo a spiritual death in order to be resurrected in a new reality is fundamental (and even fundamentalist) to the spiritual progress of Francis. When he tells Br Leon of the ‘route’ it is as much for the edification of humanity as for himself. An awareness is beginning to dawn on him that he has already undergone a re-orientation towards the great black cross mentioned in Messiaen’s *mis-en-scène*. But only God knows which staircase he will take.

The second tableau reinforces the subordination of all things to Christ through the litanic *Cantique des Créatures*. It concludes with Francis, a human being after all like St Thomas, having the courage to state his own doubts and reveal his innermost fear of the leper whose contorted face and terrible smell so repel him. In depicting Francis’s prayer that he may not only meet a leper but also be able to love him, Messiaen uses the following distorted version of Francis’s theme (tableau 2/p.77) that blends his theme and the leper’s, along with being a reminder of the opening of the *Turangalîla-Symphonie*:

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<sup>65</sup> Op. Cit., à Kempis, 69.

<sup>66</sup> Op. Cit., à Kempis, 38.

Ex. 115 Francis's theme tableau 2/p.77 (amended orchestration):

The musical score for Francis's theme tableau 2/p.77 (amended orchestration) is presented in two systems. The first system (p. 77) includes staves for 1st VI. (tous), 2nd VI. (tous), Altoes (tous), Vcl. (tous), and V. Crosse caisses. The second system (p. 78) includes staves for 1st VI., 2nd VI., Altoes, Vcl., I. 1st Claves, II. Cymb., III. Gong, and V. Crosse caisses. The score features various musical notations including notes, rests, and dynamic markings such as ppp, cresc., and sf. A large '2' and '8' are visible at the top left of the first system, and a large '3' and '16' are visible in the middle of the second system.

Francis's prayer is constantly interrupted by chords and *sons-pédales* sonorities that in *Couleurs* have signified the abyss (see fig. 40 in *Couleurs*). Although not marked as such in the opera, the message is clear that Francis (and

humanity) is in his own private abyss from which only God, signified in the birdsong that concludes the tableau, can rescue him. Three abyss-like chords conclude the act, leaving the audience waiting and wondering what will happen to Francis.

With this tableau Messiaen imparts a vision of humanity cut off from itself. What is the point of having a pious 'faith that will move mountains' when there is no love?<sup>67</sup> If, according to the *Cantique des Créatures*, God has made everything, then he has also made humanity with all its faults. Messiaen is stating that it is our duty not only to praise and glorify God but also to do the same for *all* creation. The mark of God is written for those who are prepared to read it on all the faces of humanity and maybe especially on the diseased and dying. Moreover the sacrifice made for humanity by Christ on the cross represents both the death of sin and the death of the body. Even into the twentieth century sickness has been looked upon as a form of divine vengeance and people with leprosy have automatically been pariahs.<sup>68</sup> Through the leper in tableau two, Messiaen makes a connection between the sickness of the leper/humanity and the sickness of the body of Christ. Both must die to sin in order to be resurrected to new life, and this is exactly what happens in the next tableau in which Francis meets the leper and undergoes a transformation.

The first tableau had presented Francis's/Messiaen's recognisance of other's humanity, and the second his own recognisance. Now comes the moment of catharsis. Even before Francis appears we know that he is going to be the agent of the leper's transformation. Like Kundry in Wagner's *Parsifal*, the leper scoffs at the brotherhood's piousness - if they lived as he did, maybe they would disgust

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<sup>67</sup> St Paul's first letter to the Corinthians 13:2.

<sup>68</sup> For an example of the the idea of sickness and divine vengeance witness the religious politics that surrounded the advent of AIDS in the early 1980s.

themselves. In mocking the brotherhood the leper uses Francis's theme (tableau 3/p.18):<sup>69</sup>

**Ex. 116** tableau 3/p.18



Like St Thomas, who asks to put his fingers into Christ's wounds so he will believe in the resurrection, the leper, to whom Francis benignly and in the tones of a patriarch says: 'offer your evil in penitence, my son', responds: 'Penitence! Penitence! First take away my pustules and after, after I shall do penitence!' Francis reminds him (and himself) that 'If the interior man is beautiful, he shall appear glorious at the moment of the resurrection'.<sup>70</sup> That is, the transfiguration must take place within each individual if their outward appearance is to change. There is latent in this moment the story of Christ's healing of ten lepers. When only one turns back to glorify God, Christ says to him 'Arise, go thy way: thy faith hath made thee whole'.<sup>71</sup>

The Angel that appears at the window is only visible, we are told, to the audience. The Angel provides Francis with the means of speaking to the leper:

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<sup>69</sup> In his appearance, behaviour and impropriety dialogue, Messiaen's leper contains within his physiognomy the mediaeval suspicion that diseases of the body proceed from possession by demons (this image perhaps derives from St Luke 8:27-39, where a man 'which had devils long time' is cured by Christ. The devils fly out of the man and enter into the herd of pigs which drown themselves).

<sup>70</sup> Op. Cit., Programme, 89.

<sup>71</sup> St Luke 17:11-19.



Leper: What did he say? I don't understand.

Francis: He said: your heart accuses you, but God is greater than your heart.

Angel: But God, but God, but God is all Love, and he who remains in love remains in God, and God in him!<sup>72</sup>

In this statement there is a distant echo of the text used by Messiaen for *Le Banquet Céleste*.<sup>73</sup> This proves the catalyst for the moment of Francis's recognisance. Between lines from a well-known prayer for peace (attributed to St Francis) the leper asks Francis for forgiveness. This strange and tortured harmonisation of Francis's theme then (tableau 3/p.109) prefigures Francis's response: 'Where sadness is found, there I sing of joy!':<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Op. Cit., Programme, 90.

<sup>73</sup> St John 6:56: 'He who eats by flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and me in him.'

<sup>74</sup> This is sung to a line reminiscent of Br Leon's at the opening - see ex. 114.

## Ex. 117 tableau 3/p.109

Un peu vif (♩ = 76)

1<sup>er</sup> Flûte

1<sup>er</sup> Basson

Saint François

1<sup>er</sup> Vl. (tous)

2<sup>de</sup> Vl. (tous)

Alto (tous)

Vlc. (tous)

76

Modéré (♩ = 92)

1<sup>er</sup> Flûte

1<sup>er</sup> Basson

Saint François

Où se trou - ve la tris - tes - se.

As stated in Chapter 1, repentance and recognisance of sin precede a cathartic transformation. Francis in return asks the leper to forgive him, too:

Where darkness is found, there I bring the light!

Forgive me, my son: I have not loved you enough ...<sup>75</sup>

When Francis embraces the leper, he is healed [*complètement transformé*]:

<sup>75</sup> Op. Cit., Programme, 91.

Miracle! Miracle! Miracle! Look Brother, look, the sores have disappeared  
from my skin! I am healed! ...<sup>76</sup>

He is healed - the abyss of his soul has raised its hands and sought the profundity of Christ. After his initial joy, symbolised in a dance with music reminiscent of *Joie du sang des d'étoiles* (V) and more particularly the *Final* (X) from the *Turangalila-Symphonie*, the leper becomes penitent and weeps: 'I'm not worthy of being healed'. He does this again to Francis's theme, confirming that Francis is the catalyst of his change (tableau 3/p.166):

Ex. 118 tableau 3/p.166

Bien modéré (♩ = 60)

Le lépreux: Je ne suis pas di-gne d'être gué-ri...

Fl. en Sol

1<sup>er</sup> Violon

Francis comforts him while Christ (chorus) sings: 'To those who have loved greatly: all is pardoned!', again to another version of Francis's theme.<sup>77</sup>

Here the message to troubled humanity and modernity is clear: repent, turn to Christ and all will be forgiven and healed ('his yoke is easy and his burden is light'). The leper's appearance belies his predestination - a book is always more than its cover. Predestination follows as the subject of the next tableau *L'Ange Voyager* where the Angel, dressed like one of the angels found in one the 'Annunciations' of

<sup>76</sup> Op. Cit., Programme, 91.

<sup>77</sup> Op. Cit., Programme, 91.

Fra Angelico (found in the St Mark Museum of Florence), visits the monastery, *prevue* from the first tableau, and knocks loudly at the door. Br Eli opens the door and answers:

Who disturbs me without cease? I am vicar of this order: I have to establish plans, edit the texts. How can I work in such conditions?

Angel: You seem angry, Brother Eli ... anger troubles the spirit, it obscures discernment, it obscures discernment of the truth.

Br Eli: Let the truth alone. Don't bother my mind [*esprit*], and tell me quickly what you want!<sup>78</sup>

Brother Eli is a symbol of humanity caught up in its own strife; entrapped like (Klee)/Benjamin's *Angelus Novus* whose storm of progress has got caught up in its wings and is being blown inexorably back, unable to attain the desired paradise.<sup>79</sup> Br Eli is caught up in the pile of debris before the angel. But Messiaen's Angel wants to calm his inner turmoil and shut off the storm from paradise. The Angel asks 'What do

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<sup>78</sup> Op. Cit., Programme, 93.

<sup>79</sup> Op. Cit., Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', *Illuminations*, 249. Benjamin's fears about modernity echo Baudelaire, who warns of its dangers: 'There is another error much in fashion today, which I propose to avoid like the plague. I refer to the idea of progress. This smoky beacon-light, a creation of current pseudo-philosophy, patented but without guarantee from Nature or the Divinity, this modern lantern sends out beams of darkness over the whole domain of knowledge; liberty dies away, punishment vanishes. Whoever wants to understand the workings of history must first of all put out this treacherous beacon. This ludicrous idea, which has bloomed on the rubbish dump of modern vanity, has absolved every man from his duty, delivered every soul of its responsibility, released the will from all the bonds laid upon it by the love of beauty; and, if this distressing lunacy persists for long, all the declining races will fall into doting decrepitude on the pillow of fatalism. The infatuation is the symptom of an already too obvious decadence.' Op. Cit., Baudelaire, 'The Universal Exhibition of 1855; The Fine Arts', 121.

you think of predestination? Have you rejected the old man to reclothe the new man, and find your true visage: preordained by God in justice, in the justice of holiness [*la sainteté*], in the holiness of truth?’<sup>80</sup> But Br Eli turns the Angel away gruffly. The Angel tries again, and this time Br Bernard replies that ‘I have often thought, after my death, that our Saviour Jesus Christ will look at me as he regards the tributary money and say: ‘Of whom is this image and this inscription?’<sup>81</sup> Francis’s theme is used again here (tableau 4/p. 151) as an intimation of what will happen to Francis after death. Br Bernard continues: ‘And, if it pleases God by his grace, I would have the power to reply to him: ‘Of You, of You! It is for this reason that I left the world and am here now ...’<sup>82</sup> Confused by the Angel, who when asked what its name was, stated: ‘*Il est merveilleux ...*’, Br Massée closes the door and looks at Br Bernard who mysteriously sings ‘perhaps it was an angel ...’<sup>83</sup> Again the message is clear, to remain watchful until death for the coming of Christ, but also that Christ remains within contemporary humanity, waiting to be acknowledged so that he may transfigure the world - ‘only say the word and I shall be healed ...’.<sup>84</sup>

Having tried to speak to Francis, the Angel appears to Francis while he is praying the *Cantique de Soleil*. In the preface to the fourth act, Messiaen describes the angel’s wings as ‘multicoloured [*quinticolores*] and divided into vertical bands of

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<sup>80</sup> Op. Cit., Programme, 94.

<sup>81</sup> Op. Cit., Programme, 95.

<sup>82</sup> Op. Cit., Programme, 95. Messiaen had used this image before in *Trois Petites Liturgies*, where the chorus sings ‘*Posez-vous comme un sceau sur mon cœur.*’ Br Bernard’s final line here is reminiscent of the notion (discussed in Chapter 1) that one must reject the world in order both to turn to God and create art.

<sup>83</sup> Op. Cit., Programme, 95. Messiaen sets part of the Angel’s statement to chords used in the chorale at the end of *La Transfiguration* on p. 435 at ‘*et locum ....*’.

<sup>84</sup> Op. Cit., *The Missal*, 30

different colours(.) ... The two wings bear resemblance to two harps or to two organ pipes [*deux jeux de tuyaux d'orgue*]. Whether one can see what Messiaen means in this final statement is debatable, but the fact is that he thought of the wings in these terms. In Chapter 5 I have described the way Messiaen uses colour in his music as a symbol of the resurrection and light of Christ's glory and as a means of making the invisible visible to humanity. Here Messiaen is connecting colour with the organ, his own personal means of communication. It is therefore unsurprising that Francis recognises the Angel this time, the same Angel that had been incorporeal (like colour) in the third tableau.

A change has therefore taken place: the cathartic act of embracing the leper and subsequent prayer (in his grotto) has brought Francis closer to the image or (as in the writings of St Thomas à Kempis) to 'the imitation of Christ'; his inner life has been transformed. The Angel then speaks to Francis of the transfiguring power of music, like Orpheus and his lyre, paraphrasing Thomas Aquinas:

God dazzles us by an excess of truth. Music carries us to God by default of truth.

You speak to God in music: He shall reply to you in music. Know the joy of happiness by the sweetness of colour and melody. And let it open for you the secrets, the secrets of Glory!

Hear this music which suspends life to the steps of heaven. Hear the music of the invisible ...<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Op. Cit., Programme, 97.

When the other brother discovers Francis in his grotto Francis explains that he was not sick, only 'laid low, overwhelmed by this music, by this celestial music. If the Angel had played his viol for a little longer, my soul would have left my body through its intolerable sweetness ...'.<sup>86</sup> A radiantly beautiful harmonisation of Francis's theme (tableau 5/p.124) symbolises Francis soul being transported towards the invisible by the Angel's viol music. The theme settles onto a C major chord, which prefigures the joy that will be Francis's (and ours) in death at the end of the opera. At the end of this fifth tableau Messiaen again signals one aspect of his opera's *raison d'être*. Music for Messiaen acts as a conduit between the phenomenal and the noumenal worlds and provides the means of the soul's transfiguration and redemption.

As indicated in Chapter 5, birdsong provides just such a tangible connection. In the sixth tableau (*Le Prêche aux Oiseaux*) Francis's sermon to the birds is realised using Messiaen's *Hors Tempo* technique in which instruments enter and leave in a controlled *ad libitum* (under the direction of the conductor who merely signals each instrumentalist to commence playing) for the most realistic effect of a musical aviary that Messiaen achieved. In doing so, Messiaen relinquishes control and allows birds from all parts of the world the freedom to fly together.<sup>87</sup> Francis addresses the birds and in so doing becomes synonymous with Messiaen and his *mission universelle* to mankind: 'In all times and places, praise your creator'.<sup>88</sup> God has given birds the gift of agility, so that they become images of resurrected bodies and light 'waiting for the day ... The day when Christ will unite all creatures', an image that Messiaen was to

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<sup>86</sup> Op. Cit., Programme, 98.

<sup>87</sup> In the *Épôde* of *Chronochromie*, the instruments play in a fictitious 4/8 time under the direction of the conductor.

<sup>88</sup> Op. Cit., Programme, 100.

use again in the ninth piece of *Eclairs sur l'au delà (Plusieurs Oiseaux des arbres de Vie)* [1988-91].<sup>89</sup> Messiaen's birds sing '*si merveilleusement*, speaking without words, like the locution of angels, only by music'<sup>90</sup> - the invisible music from the orchestral pit flying in groups of four: 'the four directions of the cross'.<sup>91</sup>

Birds in Messiaen's opera become iconic representations of our predestination, in life and death to be with God. The metaphysical cross of the birds becomes the cross that marks Francis with the five wounds of Christ's stigmata in the 7<sup>th</sup> tableau (Act III). Francis is granted actually to feel the passion of Christ in his body, a sacrifice that the choir (Christ) sings is 'in union with my sacrifice, and further surpassing yourself like a very high music, becoming yourself a second host ...'.<sup>92</sup> The chorus, as the voice of Christ, becomes partly visible, while the cross becomes sparkling and gold. We begin to see the cross that will carry him and us to the life eternal.

In the eighth and final tableau (*La Mort et la nouvelle Vie*), Francis dies after he sees the leper transformed after death into an angel. The final possibility of human transfiguration and destiny is glimpsed. Amid the sound of bells, his final words (paraphrasing St Thomas Aquinas) are: 'Saviour, Saviour, music and poetry have brought me towards you, by image, by symbol, and by default of truth(.) ... Deliver me, intoxicate me, dazzle me with your excess of Truth ... (*he dies*)'.<sup>93</sup> The choir of

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<sup>89</sup> Op. Cit., Programme, 100. Agility is one of the properties ascribed to the resurrected bodies by St Bonaventura. See Umberto Eco's *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, trans. Hugh Bredin (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986), 50-1.

<sup>90</sup> Op. Cit., Programme, 100.

<sup>91</sup> Op. Cit., Programme, 101. St Francis sings: 'Towards the Orient, the Occident, the Midi and the Aquilon: the four directions of the cross! ...'

<sup>92</sup> Op. Cit., Programme, 102.

<sup>93</sup> Op. Cit., Programme, 105.



Christ finally transforms his theme into a radiant C major *Alleluia!* as they sing of the Christian hope of resurrection, glory and '*la Joie!*'<sup>94</sup>

In this moment, Francis's/Messiaen's image of the resurrected Christ triumphs over the dissonance of modernity.<sup>95</sup> Throughout the work the audience bears witness and is ineluctably drawn into Messiaen's allegory of transfiguration. Again we have been taken up a mountain; led up out of the abyss and forced to realise our true predestination. Francis/Messiaen shows us, through art, that the means of our redemption is within ourselves. Messiaen leads by example throughout, telling us his story, a parable of his own struggle to profess his faith, to believe and communicate it through his talents. *St François* contains some of his most difficult and dissonant music, a step on from pieces like *Chronochromie* in harking back to Péladan's notion of provoking a reaction in order to precipitate redemption. Francis becomes a symbol of this consciousness, participating in the mystery of his transfiguration as he moves towards the unknown.

In the year before his death Messiaen stated that: 'I please myself always by meditating on the glorious mysteries. I am of an age when it is necessary to think of the beyond [*à l'au delà*] with the hope that it will be glorious ...'.<sup>96</sup> This statement

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<sup>94</sup> Op. Cit., Programme, 106. Trills (as in Tournemire's *L'Orgue Mystique*) are used throughout the opera to symbolise the light of the God in the resurrection. Towards the end they become increasingly persistent (tableau 8/pp. 140-7, 160-2, 168-75, 183-94) until finally they are used to decorate a C major chord at the end (with added 2<sup>nd</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup>), an image of the light and triumph of Christ.

<sup>95</sup> The opera also contains some of Messiaen's most surreal orchestral writing - see for instance the tuba glissandi in Act II, tableau 5/p.19, and the use of the Eoliphone in Act III, tableau 7/pp. 44-57.

<sup>96</sup> Cohn, Père Francis, 'Olivier Messiaen, un homme de foi', *Du côté de la Trinité* no. 7 (June 1992), 1, quoted from *Du côté de la Trinité*, no. 2 (March 1991).

highlights both the power of Messiaen's life and the authenticity of his work. He lived in the certainty of the resurrection: that through the 'imitation of Christ' in life, he would be made one with Christ in death. The eschatological and Christological dimensions of his work express a desire to reveal the sublime presence of God to humanity and, in so doing, bring humanity to God. To transform the world by embracing its wiles was not an easy task, but through his music Messiaen provided a vision of an alternate reality: a legacy for all to enjoy.

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